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HAMPERTON THE FINANCIER.



BY

MORLEY FARROW,

AUTHOR OF "NO EASY TASK."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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HAMPERTON THE FINANCIER.

BOOK THE SECOND. THE BURSTING OF A BUBBLE.

Continued.

CHAPTER II.

BROKEN FORTUNES.

ON the evening of the day when Mr. Hamperton caused so much uneasiness to his wife, Sibylla Proby was about to leave Langbourne Hall, where she had been spending the afternoon, with Mrs. Evershed. Robert was to accompany her to her father's.

"You will soon be mistress here, Sibylla," said Mrs. Evershed, as the girl stooped down and kissed her. "I feel that my time is short,

very short. Ah! I shall die happier, knowing that my son's burthen is relieved."

It was of her son, and of his fortunes that she thought. If thankful to Sibylla for the assistance which would come to him, through her, she bestowed little consideration on the prospect of happiness, which there might be in store for her. Sibylla felt this, as she bade Mrs. Evershed farewell; and she would have been indifferent to the fact, had she not seen that Robert was conscious of his mother's coldness, and pained by it.

"I hope you'll like my mother," he said, as they were walking from the house, towards Wyndon Grove, which lay in the direction whither they were going, "and that you will pardon her, if she does not seem to regard you so kindly as she ought. I am sure she will come to do so in time, Sibylla; only she has suffered such great trouble, and to know now that its cause has been in some measure removed so affects her, that she is indifferent to many objects which have a claim on her kindness and attention."

"I believe it, Robert. Pray do not mind, if she seems careless of me. It is enough to know that you love me. I can forgive so much, in knowing that."

"And in your heart of hearts," said Robert, hesitatingly, "do you acquit me of all selfishness—of all self-seeking?"

"All, Robert, all! You know I do!"

They came to the grove at last; and the shadows were falling about them, as they had been falling weeks ago, when Robert told her that dreary story of his loving her, and of his love being vain. But the shadows were darker now; for overhead the clouds were lowering, and westward the sun was setting in an angry sky.

It was only natural that the lovers should allude to that past scene here, which had been so fruitful of pain to both of them.

"You are happier now, Sibylla, than you were then!"

She looked into his face with her deep passionate eyes, and so answered him.

"How things change!" he said musingly.

"Some time ago I never entered this grove without an aching, miserable heart. I little guessed that I should soon be walking in it with you as my betrothed wife ; and that my fortunes would look brighter and happier. Hark ! Isn't that thunder ?"

It was thunder—distant yet, but increasing in its diapason, momentarily, as though a storm was approaching.

"We had better hurry on, Sibylla."

So they quickened 'their pace through the grove. Upon getting to the opening, they saw the angry aspect of the heavens—the piled-up clouds, leaden in hue, but shot here and there with red dashes of the glare of the sun, which had now gone down.

"It will rain soon," said Robert ; "I must see you home, and then return. My mother may be alarmed, if I am not with her."

They reached Mr. Proby's house soon. Just as they approached it, a dog-cart was being driven away, which seemed to have set some one down at the door.

"Won't you come in, Robert?"

"No. I must get home for my mother's sake."

So they parted ; and Sibylla had hardly shut the door upon her lover, before she stood partly blinded in the passage by a vivid flash of lightning.

For her own sake she had no fear, but she wished that Robert had come in. He was hurrying home ; stopping, however, now and then, and listening, like her, to the angry roar of the thunder.

She passed upstairs to her room, to take her bonnet off before joining her father. As she reached the landing, she met a servant, who said that a gentleman was with her master in the dining-room.

"Who is he?"

"The gentleman who was here some weeks ago. The tall, stout, red-faced gentleman with the bald head. Only his face isn't so red now—it's quite pale and flurried."

The former part of this explanation served to give Sibylla to understand that Mr. Hamperton was in the house.

She soon hurried downstairs. Upon opening the dining-room door, she witnessed a sight which struck a strange horror to her heart. Mr. Hamperton and Mr. Proby were sitting opposite each other near the window, their chairs approaching. With one hand raised, as if in protest against something that the solicitor was saying, and with a face, from which all the colour had departed, leaving on it a ghastly expression of agony, Mr. Proby sat listening to Mr. Hamperton. This latter gentleman, by no means wearing his wonted habit of ease, was making some statement, and seemed to be doing his best to render it palatable to his hearer.

Sibylla was unheard as she opened the door, and, for a moment or two, stood struck with wonder at the unexpected vision before her. It needed no omniscience to tell her that there was evil abroad, and, that she was a sharer in it. Suddenly the lightning struck into the room; and on quickly turning his face, Mr. Hamperton recognised the presence of another person besides Mr. Proby. Mr. Proby turned and saw her too.

"Oh ! Sibylla," he cried, in a feeble, anguished voice, "we——"

"Hush !" said Mr. Hamperton, imperatively. "Let me explain." Sibylla had come to the side of her father, and he had taken her hand.

"I am sorry to be the bearer of very painful intelligence," Mr. Hamperton went on ; "extremely sorry ! I would rather undergo untold punishment than have come here upon my present mission !"

Sibylla felt her hand pressed impatiently by her father. "You can't mend matters," said Mr. Proby to Hamperton, urging him to abandon his usual eloquent preface.

"I know it, Mr. Proby ! I know it ! I only wished to prepare your daughter's mind for the disaster which has fallen on you—and on her !"

"Let me know the truth," exclaimed Sibylla.

"Then, I am sorry to say, that the last commercial enterprises, in which Mr. Proby had largely speculated, have failed. I was never more astonished in my life, than upon hearing

the sad news this afternoon, when I went to see after your five thousand, Miss Proby !”

“And that five thousand ?” cried Sibylla, with flashing eye and passionately angry voice ; “and that five thousand——”

“I grieve very much to say I could not realize that amount, and, in short, that——”

“All is gone ! all is gone !” moaned Mr. Proby.

With forced calmness Sibylla said—

“Money was intrusted into your hands in the faith that you would invest it to the best advantage. What have you done with that money ?”

“The letters which passed between your father and myself are sufficient to explain what I have done with it. I have always given Mr. Proby the best advice ; and when I believed that he could sell out to the greatest advantage and buy in other companies, I counselled him to do so. To my sincere regret certain companies have failed ; and to my sincerest regret, Mr. Proby was greatly interested in them.”

Turning a piteous face from his daughter to

Mr. Hamperton, and from Mr. Hamperton to his daughter, Mr. Proby said—

“Is all lost?—is all lost?”

“All is lost, I am grieved to say.”

Mr. Proby's head sank forward, and he clasped it with anguish.

“You are aware, Miss Proby,” continued Mr. Hamperton, “that your father some weeks ago sold out shares which he had taken in a certain bank—sold out to great advantage, and also certain shares in a foreign company with similar advantage, and that with the original sums he had placed in my hands, and the profits he had reaped by wise speculation, some twenty thousand in all, he invested largely in a mine, a South African railway, and a finance association. I contemplated a complete success, and to my astonishment I have been bitterly disappointed, for the mine and the finance association have failed, and the shares in the railway are at zero.”

Then said Sibylla—

“My father must have lost all, seeing that he placed his entire property in your hands.”

"Oh, my God, Hamperton!" cried Mr. Proby, "how could you have advised me to do this? I am ruined, and my daughter is ruined too! I am utterly bankrupt—" the words died off into an inarticulate moan, and Mr. Proby sank backwards on his chair.

With a cry of alarm, Sibylla said—

"Father!"

But he did not hear her. The sudden shock, happening to one of a weak, nervous organization, had caused paralysis.

The evening darkened into night. The tempest approached nearer and nearer; the heavens were all a flame one moment, and pitchy black the next. Such a tempest visited Langbourne then as had not visited it for years.

Undisturbed by the roar and the glare, Mr. Proby lay senseless on his bed, watched anxiously by his daughter and by the doctor. Towards midnight he became conscious, and called for Sibylla, but he was forbidden to exert himself by speaking unnecessarily, and he soon sank to sleep.

Persuaded by the doctor, who said that he would sit up with her father, Sibylla then left Mr. Proby's bed-side, and retired to her room to seek a little rest. The thunder had been less frequent for the last half-hour, but it broke out anew when she reached her bed-room.

Heedless of the lightning, she stood at the window looking across the fields to Langbourne Hall. What new misery to-morrow would not succeed the misery of to-night? She had hoped to purchase Robert Evershed by gold, and all the purchase-money was scattered to the winds.

Wearying her mind with painful questions and conjectures, she looked out on the night, dark and bright at alternate moments. All at once a flash more vivid than any yet lit up the whole heavens, and made the trees of Wyndon Grove weirdly distinct. A crashing roar of thunder, and intense darkness followed—darkness which remained for some seconds, and then became streaked with light over the fields at some distance from her window.

Sibylla felt her heart stop.

Langbourne Hall seemed to emerge from the night with a brightness that made every window in it, and all its red heavy frontage, visible.

There was fire there.

CHAPTER III.

MR. HAMPERTON EXCULPATES HIMSELF.

THE violence of the tempest spent itself ; the troubled night passed away ; morning broke. All through the dreadful night, waking again and again, Sibylla had heard the tread of foot-steps outside the house, as men came and went from the scene of the fire. Situated as her father's house was, she could see how far it raged. It did not extend to the Hall, but consumed some corn-stacks and buildings immediately contiguous to the main building itself. This much she gathered as she strained her

eyes from the window of her room at earl dawn.

It was a terrible night to her, and its imaginary terrors were not less agonising than its real. Again and again she awoke, and, having hurriedly thrown over her a few clothes, went to her father's room, and inquired of the doctor how he was. The usual answer was that he still slept, and that he seemed to be sleeping with comfort. So answered, she went back to her apartment, threw herself on to her bed, and fell into a troublous doze.

In some painful position Robert Evershed always appeared in her nightmare. She was wandering with him amidst precipices of awful height, when suddenly Hamperton appeared, seized him, and hurled him down. Shrieking, she saw him tumble, tumble, and tumble into an almost bottomless abyss. Then the dream changed. She and Robert were again together, hurrying through a dismal grove, the trees on either side tossing their branches in the air, and the lightning flashing upon them with horrid brightness. Then one

flash, more vivid than the rest, struck Robert, and he fell at her feet, dead. Piteously crying, she awoke, but it was only to fall asleep again, and again to be troubled by some dreadful nightmare. She was looking at Langbourne Hall, when suddenly an adjoining building, without any perceptible cause, burst into flames. The flames leapt to the Hall, creeping round the windows, and licking their sashes into a blaze. Suddenly Robert Evershed appeared at one of them, vainly struggling to open it. On and on crept the stealthy flame, until it reached his window, circling quickly round it, and surrounding him with flame as he struggled ineffectually to get out. Sibylla stretched out her hands to him; called to him, and in calling to him awoke herself. She was trembling; and the cold dew of imaginary agony stood upon her forehead.

It had been day some hours now, and she did not go to sleep again. When she had dressed she went to her father's room. The doctor was still there, and Mr. Proby was yet sleeping.

"How is papa?" she said.

"Better, I believe. This sleep looks well. With your permission I will leave you with him, Miss Proby, and come again shortly. You have seen the fire?"

"Yes, it was dreadful. Do you know whether much damage is done?"

"I went down during the night, and asked some of the passers-by, and I was told there was. Surely though Mr. Evershed is insured. I am going there now, to inquire after Mrs. Evershed's health; the shock, I fear, may do her some great mischief."

"It would be selfish of me to request you to ask Mr. Evershed to come down here, whilst he is occupied with his own trouble; but you will tell him, please, that papa is very ill."

"Certainly. Are you in any way able to account for the shock?"

Sibylla said hurriedly, "He received some bad news, but you need not tell Mr. Evershed this; only tell him that he is very ill."

The doctor went away, leaving Sibylla with her father. A servant brought her some break-

MR. HAMPERTON EXCULPATES HIMSELF. 17

fast, but she scarcely touched it. An hour passed away, during which Mr. Proby still slept ; then the doctor re-appeared.

" I have brought a note for you from Mr. Evershed," he said, as he entered.

Sibylla took the note, walked to the window, and read it.

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" DEAREST SIBYLLA," it ran—" You have seen or known of the disaster which has just occurred. Two large barns and several stacks have been destroyed, and much damage has been done to the stables. The house fortunately escaped, though I feared, at one time, that i would have gone. My mother was greatly alarmed, and the shock has affected her seriously. I wish you could come up ; but Cureton tells me that Mr. Proby is very ill, and that you are unable to leave him. How sorry I am. Dear Sibylla, it seems to me that I am never to have any luck. Neither the buildings nor the stacks were insured, and I shall therefore be a great loser ; I know not, as yet, to what extent. We are, as you may imagine, in great

distress and confusion here ; but when I have got a little of the chaos into order, I will come down and see you. Affectionately yours,

“ R. E.”

This letter increased her wretchedness. The hope that she once had of becoming Robert Evershed's wife, dowered worthily and able to assist him in his arduous work, was gone. The memorable words which he had spoken weeks ago in Wyndon Grove started to her recollection, chilling her spirits, and numbing her power of thought. How could she become his wife, this fresh disaster of the storm of the past night having added a new burthen to his shoulders, already enough oppressed ?

Reflecting in this mournful mood, she turned her head to the bed on which her father lay. The disaster which had fallen on her, crushing her hope of love, and darkening with terrible uncertainty the future, had fallen on him, too — ruined, beggared, and unconscious under the blow which struck him down, when he first knew the dread truth. It was only by a na-

tural association of ideas that she should think of Hamperton. It was to him that this trouble that had smitten them was due; to him that her love had become a vain thing; to him that her father lay helpless and unconscious there!

Sibylla had not long to accuse an absent adversary, for in a short time a servant entered, and said that Mr. Hamperton was below, and wished to see her.

Descending the stairs and entering the dining-room, she found that clever man there, his face wearing an appropriate expression of sympathy and condolence.

He trusted Mr. Proby was better—he hoped he would soon rally; it would be a source of indescribable grief if anything happened to his friend, than whom he esteemed nobody more highly. With regard to the late miserable circumstances which he, Mr. Hamperton, had the mournful duty of first communicating to him, he could only say that they were as unexpected as they were lamentable; but Mr. Proby might rely on him for any service which he might desire him to perform in the future. Mr. Ham-

perton would consider himself in Mr. Proby's hands, and promote his interests in any way the latter gentleman could suggest!

"Impostor and swindler!" burst from Sibylla's lips, as the solicitor concluded his harangue. "Impostor and swindler! you shall be exposed. It is you, and you only, who have ruined my father!"

She had curbed herself as long as she was able, whilst Mr. Hamperton was making his specious address; but there was a limit to her patience, and that limit was passed at last.

Mr. Hamperton opened his eyes, and, in a deprecating tone, said:—

"Miss Proby!"

"Impostor and swindler!" she said again, with heaving breast, and fiery eye; "I will expose you! The story of the dreadful havoc you have made of my father's little fortune shall be told, and the association of your name with the evil work. If I had any scruples as to the general uprightness of your character, I had no apprehension that you were only a commercial and professional harpy, who spun schemes for

getting money, and broke them up when you had satisfied yourself, regardless of the claims of others, without whose assistance you would not for an instant have been able to realise a farthing. The disaster which has befallen us gives clear evidence of what you are, and what your business is. With cleverer brains than the majority, you have started these schemes, giving them a plausible appearance of being successful ; and when you have persuaded others to be fools enough to assist them with their money, you wind them up, pocketing enough for yourself, and leaving your poor victims in the lurch ! I know this is the truth, James Hamperton, and you cannot deny it !”

“ I assure you, Miss Proby,” returned the gentleman, in his most persuasive voice, “ that you are labouring under a very great misconception. But that I can well understand the feelings which prompt you to make such an accusation, I should answer you with more decision.”

And Mr. Hamperton looked insulted virtue to the life. But his words and his look failed to touch Sibylla.

“ You came here,” she said, “ and found that my poor father had a little money. You ridiculed his having given up business, and expatiated on the fortunes which were to be made by speculation ! You described to him schemes, which were to be so profitable to those investing in them ; artfully seeing that he might be brought round by your specious tongue, to assist them with the slight fortune that he had accumulated. You persuaded him successfully ! He was induced to place what money he had in your hands, and when you had made it answer your own purposes, you came and told him that, unforeseen and unexpected by you, certain enterprises had failed, and that he was a beggar ! ”

“ I am forced to contradict you ; but you are accusing me in a most unjustifiable manner,” said the solicitor, in his blandest style. “ It is true that I used a certain amount of persuasion to induce your father, for his sake, and for your own, to invest in speculations which, indeed, bade fair to turn out most profitably to the shareholders ; but I used only such persuasion as I should employ to anyone who, I was

aware, had the means of bettering his position."

"You persuaded my father for your own interest, but were quite regardless of his—I am sure of it. He, poor man, is reaping the bitter fruit now. But his wrongs shall not go unpunished. It shall be my task to see that they are not; and by some means I will cause it to be known that it was your handiwork that ruined him!"

"Your filial affection is most touching, Miss Proby. I only wish the indignation against myself, for your own credit, was more justified. And so, you purpose undertaking the heroic task of exposing me?—to employ your own suggestive terms."

"I do! I do!"

"Your time will be well employed—profitably employed! But stay. Hear me first. You refuse, I suppose, to believe that I was guided by honest motives?"

"I do refuse to believe you—most unhesitatingly!"

"I am very sorry; for such a course on your

part places me in hostility to you. And it pains me to be hostile to anyone—more especially to a lady! May I ask you,” added Mr. Hamperton, “what means you purpose taking to lend effective force to your threat of giving publicity to the sad events which have just occurred, and to the connexion of my name with them?”

Sibylla looked haughtily at him, and answered :—

“Do not fear that I shall not find means of exposing you.”

“You really mean what you say, Miss Proby?”

“I do.”

“Then hear what I have to answer to your threat. It is perfectly true that I persuaded Mr. Proby to speculate, but it is not true that I employed any underhand influence. I believed implicitly what I told him. Now, Miss Proby, though I admit this much, I deny that I should have ever successfully persuaded him, had it not been for you! If you will carry back your memory to the time when, after a long separation, I had the pleasure of renewing my intimacy with your much-respected father, you

will surely recal the fact that, after my having dilated to him (as I might have dilated to a stranger,) upon the advantages which were to be derived from taking shares in various speculations, then, before the public, he referred to you, asking you whether, or not, he should follow my advice. Be kind enough, Miss Proby, to tell me whether or not I am speaking correctly."

"He referred to me, it is true," said Sibylla, in a troubled voice.

"Exactly. He referred to you. So far so good! It is sufficient for my case, that he did not agree to take my advice, until he had the opinion of another person, who was his own daughter! So much you have admitted. If you will have the kindness to exert your memory a little more, you will recal the fact that he gave me no answer on the day when I first mentioned the speculation, saying again that he would talk the matter over with you, and give me an answer the next morning! You follow me, Miss Proby! Pray tell me if I am stating the truth."

Sibylla was silent.

"Be kind enough to answer me," persuasively urged James Hamperton.

"Well — well," she responded, "it may be so!"

"It is so, Miss Proby, and you know it as well as I do. Recal, please, the next morning, — I visited this house for the purpose of knowing whether your father intended to embark in any of the speculations which I had brought before his notice on the preceding evening. I found that he did. If his own words had not acquainted me with the fact, I should have had little difficulty in surmising it was all owing to his daughter's counsel, that I found him so disposed! His own words, however, gave me unmistakably to understand that he had been talking the matter over with you, and that your advice, and your advice only, had effectually supplemented mine! You will not, I suppose, deny this, Miss Proby!"

The haughty, angry glance had died off Sibylla's face.

"I have not done yet," he said, noticing the effect he had produced; "if I have not said enough to cause you to understand that it was

your persuasion which induced your father to embark in speculations, which, to my sincere regret, have turned out so disastrously, I must tell you that I have letters of his in my possession, wherein such phrases as these occur :— ‘I have consulted my daughter, and her advice is that I am to take some more shares.’ Such expressions are unmistakable ; and will convince any unprejudiced person that, on you more than on me, rests the onus of having induced your father to speculate ! I have numbers of his letters in my possession ; and there is scarcely one in which there is not a reference to his daughter, as either thanking me, thanking me, Miss Proby, for the good service I was rendering him, or as advising him to embark in additional speculations. What have you to say to this ? Surely you will not deny what your father has written ?”

In the toils, in the toils ! Sibylla could not get away.

Hamperton resumed :—

“Let your friends know that I persuaded your father ! Let the world know ! What blame

do you think will be cast on me? None! But when I give my version of the story, what opinion do you think will be formed of your conduct; more especially when the motive which caused you to persuade your father is known?"

"Motive!" said Sibylla quickly.

"Motive, Miss Proby! for you had a motive. And I can guess it! If I remember rightly, at the earlier part of this discussion you made some reference to your having fears about my scrupulousness, even when you advised your father to lend his ears to my counsel in the matter of the speculations. From this I can only come to the conclusion that you were indifferent to my general honesty so long as money was made for you by my means. This is the only view I can form of your words and of your subsequent actions. Now, this fact, taken in connection with your motive, reflects somewhat discredibly on your own conduct. I might be a rogue,—your father's money might be imperilled,—but so long as there was a chance of your being rich enough to become Mr. Robert Evershed's wife, it mattered very little."

And so Sibylla's heart had been read by that plausible, smiling man before her.

"I see you do not say that I charge you unfairly," said Mr. Hamperton; "I knew you could not. You were bent on winning Mr. Evershed, whose circumstances forbade his marrying, unless the woman he married had money. I knew that you liked him. Even on that very evening, when I spoke to your father about speculating, he and I had been conversing upon this matter. When you came in I watched you. I saw your face brighten up, when I spoke of the money which enterprise could make in these days of extended and extending commerce. I traced the current of your thoughts; for I have seen a good many curious things in my day, Miss Proby, and I am tolerably wide awake. I was certain that your advice to your father would coincide with mine; in the morning I found that I was right! Now, I venture to say, that if you had not been bent on winning Robert Evershed, (I was on the point of saying, buying him,) you would not have urged your father to trust to the risks of speculation.

What will be the opinion of your friends when they know that he was ruined through your eagerness to marry one, whom you could not marry unless you brought him a handsome dowry?"

The girl had turned deadly pale, and was trembling from head to foot.

Still the inexorable Hamperton went on, smiling and cutting her to the heart at every word.

"You see my position, Miss Proby. It gives me an advantage over you; and I shall use it if I am pushed to it, you may be certain. Expose me, if you like! Say, 'James Hamperton persuaded my father to speculate in bubble companies—contrived to get into his hands all the property he possessed—flattered him for a time with stories of the success he was meeting with and the money he was making—and then came down one day, and told him that the companies had all failed, and that he was a beggar.' I shall then say—'I am falsely charged in some respects; in others I confess to the truth of what Miss Proby has said; it was, however, she who

urged her father to speculate (of which I have proofs), in order that she might get money to marry the man she wanted!—How gratified your friends will be to hear this! How gratified Mr. Evershed will be, when he knows that from mines, railways, hotels, financial associations, and joint stock banks, was to come the purchase-money for his affections!”

And Mr. Hamperton pointed this remark with a smile more fascinating than ever.

Sibylla sate down, and covered her face with her hands.

Gallantry forbade such a gallant man as Mr. Hamperton from using his advantage any more.

“I am grieved,” he said, “to see a woman in tears. Pardon me, I have been obliged to use threats, because you began by threatening me. But I assure you, Miss Proby, I should have scorned to have done so, had you not set the example; but we will have done. Withdraw your threat, and I will withdraw mine. I am only a man—I have been betrayed into unkind expressions. Let me know that

you will be silent upon my connection with your father's losses, and cause your father, upon his recovery, to be the same; and I will be silent on the part you have unfortunately had in occasioning them. Mutual forgetfulness and forgiveness had better be the order of the day."

Still Sibylla sate with her hands before her face sobbing bitterly.

"If this emotion is due to anything I have said," exclaimed Mr. Hamperton, "I beg of you to pardon me. It pains me to see those tears and to hear those sobs."

"Go, and leave me!" she cried.

"Am I pardoned?"

"Go and leave me!" she cried again; "you have said enough! Oh, my God, I wish I had never seen you!"

"I suppose," said Hamperton, "there is no chance of seeing my poor friend. I am deeply concerned for his position—I am indeed." (Had Sibylla looked up she would have seen something like very sincere emotion in the face of the strange gentleman before her.) "I trust soon to hear that he is better. And I beg of you to

assure him that, if I can ever be of any service to him, at some future time, I shall consider myself bound in honour to go any length on his account."

And with these words, knowing that he had said enough to insure the silence of Sibylla, Mr. Hamperton went away. In a quarter-of-an-hour's time he was driving in a dog-cart to the St. Belcham's station, to take the train there for London.

Sibylla was utterly miserable. Look where she would she saw no hope. Bitterly she confessed to herself that Hamperton had spoken truly. It was to win Robert Evershed that she had persuaded her father to speculate. And what had resulted from her mad passion? The golden bribe was irretrievably lost; and, to add to the agony of her awakened conscience, there was her father lying helpless—almost senseless, up-stairs, stricken down by the blow that, but for her, would not have fallen upon him. All anger against Hamperton had died away. Even if she could have exposed him without exposing herself, she would not have cared to

do so. It was herself she lashed—her miserable self. What would Robert think, if he knew what she had done? But again—what could Robert be to her now? As she had endeavoured to buy him, and as her efforts had now been rendered nugatory, she would herself sever the tie which bound them. Robert, burthened with another misfortune—the misfortune entailed by the fire of the foregoing night—should not have the pain of saying the fatal words; and Mrs. Evershed, by her cold look, should not hint that Sibylla must no longer think of becoming her son's wife.

So she thought long and bitterly, sitting by herself in the parlour down-stairs, after the departure of James Hamperton.

She was aroused by hearing the front door bell ring. She listened. She knew the step and voice at the door. Robert was there.

How she had thrilled but a few days since at his step and voice! Now there was an impulse on her to run away and hide herself from him. He entered.

"Sibylla, dear," he said, taking her hand, "I am so sorry to hear of this illness which has

happened to your father. It is so unfortunate at this time, when I am once more (no unusual thing this, for me,) in ill luck! Sibylla——”

He noticed something in her look, unwittingly by him before. She did not press his hand, or respond to his gaze. “What’s amiss? You are unwell!”

“No, no, I am not. I am so miserable!”

With a look of alarm, he led her to the seat from which she had arisen on his entrance.

“Sibylla, I did not think you would have welcomed me thus!”

“Go—go, Robert!” she cried, with despairing impulse; “go! I cannot be your wife. A heavy misfortune—heavier than you can guess—has fallen upon us, and I must not be your wife. Ask—ask no questions; but leave me—leave me!”

She clasped her hands to her forehead, murmuring for him to go, and sobbing that she was the most miserable of women.

“Good God!” exclaimed Robert, wonderingly; “what has happened? Your father is ill—what other grief have you?”

"Do not question me," she said, in a wailing voice. "Do not question me. I am too wretched to speak. Do not wish to know. Go, and leave me—go, and leave me."

"Oh, Sibylla! do you speak thus to one who loves you as I do? Whose great joy in life is his love for you, and his trust in your love for him? Sibylla!"

She swayed herself to and fro, murmuring and sobbing still.

"If any misfortune has happened to you, besides that of your father's illness, am I not to know it? Surely, Sibylla, you have no cause to keep your troubles from me? Who will be so ready to sympathize with them as I? Who so ready as I to try to alleviate them?"

"Don't speak thus, or you will drive me mad! I am unworthy that you should speak thus kindly to me!"

"Unworthy!"

"Most unworthy! most unworthy! Ask me to say no more, but go—go, in kindness to me!"

"I am walking in a maze," said Robert; "I know not what to think, or do."

Breaking in upon these words was the quick ring of a bell up-stairs.

"Hark!"

It was Sibylla who spoke. Again the bell was rung, and the hurry of footsteps was heard above.

"My father must be worse!" said Sibylla, with fatal prescience.

She darted from the room, up the stairs, followed by Robert. When they reached Mr. Proby's room, the doctor was standing at the door.

The story on his face might be read by the dullest.

"My father! Oh, my father!" cried Sibylla, passing the doctor, and springing to the side of the bed, on which Mr. Proby was lying.

"He has had another seizure," whispered the doctor, as they approached the bed, too.

A fatal seizure this time. Sibylla had only to look at her father once, to know that he was dead!

CHAPTER IV.

A LOITERING ONE.

AT Messingham Priory, life is still flowing on very pleasantly. It is summer there, but summer brightly and warmly gliding on to autumn. While Sibylla Proby is struck down by sorrow, the two beautiful women here find that each day repeats the same peaceful, joyous story of the one preceding. Every household association is happy, and Lester Temple has full participation in these genial influences. His tutor life with Harry has apparently not exhausted his nerve force very much, for there is colour in his face, brightness in his eye, and elasticity in his step.

Though his appearance would seem to indicate that he is not much victimised by trouble or annoyance, he is aware that that has happened to him which occasions many people much trouble, and sometimes much annoyance. He has fallen in love. And he has so fallen in love, that he might well be expected to find his rest disturbed, and his days not all peace. Perhaps, when he is out of sight, he exhibits traces of emotion, which would belie the peace of mind, generally, to all appearance, enjoyed by him. He is given to certain eccentricities. Sitting with a book before him, in the study or in the garden, his eyes wander from it in the direction of a tall young lady — Georgine Bryant. He watches her when she is at the piano. Tripping down the stairs he notes her, and is amply rewarded if he catches sight of an ankle. His devotions at church are not performed with appropriate ardour if she is near him, or opposite him. He has a good voice, and can sing, if he chooses, very nicely. But sometimes he does not sing at all, and this occurs when she seems indifferent to him, or

when she accepts the offered hymn book from his hand with careless thanks. At other times he sings with quite divine ardour, and astonishes any weak, rustic mind which may hear his tune-ful lays. This ardour is due, I regret to say, less to exalted religious unction than to the worldly satisfaction that Georgine has been smiling on him, and because she is at his side, and seems pleased to be there.

Also, Lester has got into a habit of treasuring little things which have passed through her hands. He has a little picture, drawn by her, (a sad daub his artistic taste pronounces it, I apprehend; but a miracle of loveliness and worth is his heart's verdict thereon.) He is often looking at it! Does it contain beauties of such a minute character that he is obliged to bring it close to his eyes when he wishes to give it an especially critical inspection? Or does the foolish fellow raise it to his lips to kiss it? Some violets picked by Georgine form a fragrant nosegay which reposes in his pocket, whence he takes it very often and smells it, as though it yielded some life-giving essence.

If at times prudence asks Lester Temple whether he is not guilty of very great folly in cherishing a passion for a girl, who, he knows, is worldly, ambitious, and vain, a lively imagination parries the question of prudence, and laps the tutor in an elysium of hope and dreaming love.

As for Georgine, she is, as it were, *in statu quo*. Ever since that evening when she and Lester had a little confidential conversation upon Robert Evershed, and when both expressed a hope that some good chance would lighten his hard fortune, she had been generally gracious and friendly to him. It is true that she now and then showed some of that unamiable temper which had marked her intercourse with him during the earlier days of his residence at Messingham Priory; but remembering his kindness to her in the matter of her crayon drawings, she soon did her best to make amends for conduct which might displease him.

And now she is very gracious to him, and refers to him when she has any difficulty in matters about which he may know something more than herself. She refers to him in her

music, and she refers to him in her drawing. She has even asked his advice upon her reading. This had never been extensive, or good, as Lester soon discovered. She was no fool, but she was wonderfully idle. Thanks to Lester's suggestions, she is less idle than she was; and he finds that she is a girl of much intelligence. But it must be confessed that her notions of life are not very high. Georgine boasts of no mission, as other young ladies in the neighbourhood of Messingham are wont to do; and she cares little to interest herself in schools, or in such parochial matters as a lady with means and leisure might well be expected to do. Lester sometimes gives her a hint to that effect; but she laughs the hint away, and goes on with her novel, or her drawing, or her fantasia, or (most likely) her idleness!

As this chronicle left Olivia Prince flirting amiably with Arthur Somerton, so it returns and finds her engaged in the same interesting employment. Every day or two that gentleman rides over from his place and spends the shining hours in her society. When his friends ask him

whether the happy day is fixed, he answers with some annoyance that it is *not*. Nor is it a marvel; for Olivia has not yet given Arthur any definite answer as to whether she will ever satisfy his hopes. Again and again he urges her to do so, but she smilingly says that he had better wait. If Olivia asks herself whether she ever intends to give the young gentleman an answer such as his heart covets, she is unable to get from herself a satisfactory reply. She does not yet know her own mind. If she runs over such reasons as may favour the cause of Mr. Somerton, she can run over as many reasons that do not favour that cause. So the young gentleman's fate hangs in the balance; and he is fain to be content with seeing Mrs. Prince every day or two, playing croquet with her, and indulging in such little tenderness as she will permit.

Again and again comes a wrathful epistle from Mrs. Calley to Olivia, eager to know her exact intentions with regard to Arthur, and censuring her for using such vague terms in her letters, when referring to herself and Mr. Somerton. Olivia sends back the best answer she can, and

Mrs. Calley frowns as she reads it, and says that Olivia is making a fool of herself and of the man too. Perhaps these letters of the old lady cause Olivia to think a little seriously on her relationship with Arthur Somerton, and if she shows any altered conduct to him when she meets him again, it is certainly not significant of her looking with eventual favour upon his aspirations.

So the matter stands with her and Mr. Somerton, as this chronicle gives them and their fortunes a hasty glimpse.

Of Dr. Kealwin there is not much to be said. He is as good-looking and as healthy-looking as ever. Life smiles on him with one perpetual smile. He is a good deal up at the Priory, sauntering in at all hours of the day—sometimes to breakfast, sometimes to luncheon, oftentimes to dinner. Let him come when he will, he comes without a shade of care or trouble on his face. If he comes finding Mr. Bryant complaining that the weather does not suit his health, he smiles, and wonders how the weather can affect the health of anybody. If there is a general complaint of indisposition, he smiles again, and says he was never ill in his life !

Entering the dining-room one morning, he finds those with whom this history has to do, there assembled,—Georgine doing nothing at one window; Olivia emulating her at the other, unless the listening to the tender platitudes of Mr. Somerton may be considered as representing toil; Mr. Bryant reading the *Times*; and Lester strumming at the piano. Kealwin finds these, and awakens some little interest by saying—

“What do you think?”

All are on the *qui vive*.

“I am going to make my will!” he says.

“Have you any apprehension of dying then?” asks Olivia with a laugh.

“Oh, dear me, no. It is just because I have not, that I think of my will. Knowing my excellent health, and that I might almost ensure my life for a premium that an ordinary man twenty years younger than myself would pay, I shall enjoy a perfectly new and charming sensation in making my last testamentary intentions. When the notion was first suggested to me, I laughed at it. Now I quite like it. It will be, as it were, bidding death welcome to your house,

and coolly shutting the door on him when he gets close to it!"

Two or three of his hearers laugh at this charming humour; and then the interesting subject drops.

It drops because two new comers appear on the scene—Lester's pupil Harry, and Harry's sister; this young lady appearing for the first time in this history. She is younger than her brother, and is sometimes in delicate health. When she is well, she is a romp; and comes rushing through the windows into the room now, in a manner marvellously suggestive of the absence of the necessary governess supervision.

"Really, papa, Emily must have a governess," says Georgine, to whom Emily has come putting bothering questions.

Mr. Bryant admits so much, and remembers with a certain amount of discomfort, that governesses have been the plague of his life—incompetence, impudence, ignorance, having been again and again the characteristics of the ladies who have had the superintendence of his daughters' education. He recalls to Georgine's

notice the fact of Emily's last governess having been respectfully dismissed for a habit of taking more brandy and water than ladies usually need ; and of her predecessor having left on her own account, because of having received a hint that she was engaged to superintend the education of a young lady, and not to write novels in the copy-books which had been especially purchased for that young lady's use.

" But still, papa, Emily mustn't be neglected any longer ! If you object to having a governess here, she must be sent to school !"

Emily herself objects to the latter suggestion.

" Well, I suppose we must have a governess for her," says Mr. Bryant ; and he forthwith turns to the Supplement of the *Times*, running his eye down a column, where the word—"Governess" attracts it.

A good many advertisements of governesses wanting situations he passes over, perceiving the unmistakable flang of humbug in them. The claims of ladies whose proficiency in the English, French, German, and Italian languages, is unquestionable ; whose mastery of all known

and unknown accomplishments is wonderful; whose testimonials are of an exceptionally high value, are ignored. Young ladies—whose membership of any particular church is conspicuously paraded—don't seem to gratify him very much. Middle-aged widows of wide experience are not more attractive. Young ladies educated abroad, and qualified to communicate most *recherche* knowledge, are somehow regarded with suspicion. He reads a long way down the wonderful Supplement of the *Times* before he comes upon what he fancies is a genuine article. However, the genuine article is discovered after a while, in an unpretentious advertisement; and satisfied with what he has discovered, Mr. Bryant at last speaks.

"Well, Georgine," he says, "I've been looking down the advertisements, and I've found something which I fancy will suit us." Then he reads it. Persons answering to the advertisement are requested to write S. P., Post Office, Langbourne, Essex.

"Langbourne," says Olivia, "that is not more than twenty miles from here. And doesn't Mr. Evershed live there?" This is languidly addressed to Dr. Kealwin.

"He lives there," is the response of that gentleman.

"Then it is quite possible that he knows something of S. P.," says Mr. Bryant. Then to Georgine—"Write to S. P., my dear. I rather prefer her advertisement to the majority!"

Georgine is not in a writing mood. But at her father's bidding she writes—the terms of her letter composed by herself, her father, and her sister. The letter is finally placed in an envelope, and posted to S. P., at Langbourne.

Two days afterwards the morning's letters are brought to them as they are at breakfast, to which meal the ever-bland Dr. Kealwin has stepped in.

"Here's an epistle from S. P.," remarks Georgine. "It is a hand I've never seen before."

Almost at the same time, Olivia, who is sitting by the side of Dr. Kealwin, says—

"Well, Doctor, have you made your will yet?"

"No," laughs that gentleman. "The man to be charged with the execution of that duty is not always to be got hold of. He's Hamperton!"

Olivia Prince and Dr. Kealwin chat quite merrily upon the latter gentleman's will; whilst Georgine reads her letter, and Lester Temple reads an epistle which the morning's post has also brought him.

It would not seem to be of a very pleasant nature, for his face falls as he reads it, and there is a look of pain upon his countenance before he reaches the end.

"I have had bad news," says he, looking up from his letter to the Doctor. "Poor Robert Evershed has met with a sad disaster. A fire has burnt up a great deal of his property, which had the misfortune to be uninsured. Some friends of his also have met with grievous misfortunes. A Mr. Proby has failed, and lost all his money. I always fancied that Robert liked a daughter of his, and I believe he would have made her his wife had he been better off. But perhaps I ought not to say this, as my friend in his letter only tells me that he and the Proby family have both met with misfortunes."

"Proby—did you say?" asked Georgine. "How singular! I find that it was Miss Proby's

advertisement I answered in the paper for papa ; and it is her letter that I have now in my hand. Poor girl ! Look at the letter, papa ! It is a well written one ; and I fancy Sibylla Proby will suit us !”

CHAPTER V.

GOING OUT INTO THE WORLD.

MR. PROBY was buried, and Sibylla was looking with sad heart towards the future. Once or twice during the week, when her father was lying dead, Robert Evershed called, and saw her, but their interviews were short, and their manner constrained. He had some perception of the mischief that had happened, though he had no suspicion that Hamperton was in any way mixed up with it. For mindful of the solicitor's threat, and, indeed, little caring to expose one whose share in the evil was less than her own, Sibylla avoided all questions put to her by Robert as to the full particulars of the misfor-

tune, and made no reference to the clever solicitor's name.

Whatever misery might be in store for her in the future, she could be silent on the causes which had led to her present position, more especially could she be silent before Robert Evershed.

A few days after the death of her father, she received a letter from Mr. Hamperton, which was eminently characteristic of that gentleman. In this letter he expressed, with all the eloquence at his command, the sympathy he felt for her in her present bereaved condition, uttering, at the same time, a fervent hope that Time, the great physician, would heal the wounds of her affliction. He testified to the general excellence of nature of the departed, and sincerely regretted that professional avocations, by requiring his immediate presence in Ireland, would prevent his paying his last respects to the obsequies of his much lamented friend. Leaving the region of sentiment, Mr. Hamperton proceeded to say that he would despatch a clerk of his from London to settle with Miss Proby all affairs of

a business nature, and he prayed her to believe that the clerk was fully commissioned by him to make all definite arrangements, and that she might speak in full confidence to him upon any matter upon which she desired advice. With the utmost delicacy Mr. Hamperton referred to what had taken place at their last interview, concluding his letter by averring that he relied on her implicitly for being discreetly silent on the particulars of her father's disaster, being assured that she would be only consulting her own comfort by such a course of conduct. There was a postscript to the letter, nearly as long as the letter itself, in which Mr. Hamperton professed himself eager and willing to be of service to Miss Proby, at any time and in any manner she could suggest.

In spite of Mr. Hamperton's sentiment, this letter was by no means a comforting one. Sibylla knew perfectly well what she had to expect; and when Mr. Hamperton's clerk appeared, she found that her fears were verified.

If Mr. Hamperton's real amiability of disposition made it easy for one to forget that he

was very unscrupulous, this clerk, which he despatched from London, had no superficial good qualities, to throw a halo around his unmistakably bad qualities — not that he was rude and in any wise discourteous. He had a certain blandness of manner, but it was in no-wise natural to him ; it had only grown to become a false part of him, through his association with a gentleman whose blandness was unmistakably his own, as his bald head was.

Mr. Scaling—for such was Mr. Hamperton's clerk's name—as soon as he was in the presence of Miss Proby, brought out various papers, the only remaining waifs and strays of that marvellous speculation scheme, which at one time represented poor Mr. Proby's fortune, and laid them before Sibylla, giving her, in the meantime, a glib history of their original significance and worth, as compared with their present ; the contrast being somewhat appalling. It must be admitted that Mr. Scaling had great powers of exposition, and Sibylla had no difficulty in following his meaning. Mr. Hamperton had empowered Mr. Scaling to enter into

every detail for Miss Proby's satisfaction, and he evaded no question which the young lady put to him. If the companies in which Mr. Proby had been unwise enough to embark were, to a great extent, bubble companies, or so hurriedly and so shakily got up that failure was almost inevitable, the details of their winding up, so far as it immediately concerned the property of Mr. Proby were gingerly correct, clear, and plausible. Very clear and specious, however, as Mr. Scaling's statements were, the end to which they pointed was nevertheless unalterably painful to his listener. Mr. Proby had entrusted a large sum of money to the hands of Mr. Hamperton, which had been laid out as Mr. Hamperton suggested or approved, and in a very short time all this money, with the sum which good fortune had rained down upon it during the earlier part of its adventurous career, was gone.

Gone—no!—not entirely. Some hundred and fifty pounds had been saved out of the wreck, but how this hundred and fifty was saved Mr. Scaling was unable to explain satisfactorily. In-

deed, it had not been saved at all, but was a present to Sibylla from that unfathomable personage Mr. Hamperton, who did not, however, wish her to know that it was a gift. Mr. Scaling did his best, according to his chief's orders, to explain its existence; and though his explanation was rather lame, he succeeded in deceiving Sibylla.

Mr. Scaling made his appearance two days after Mr. Proby's burial, just when Sibylla was experiencing the bitterest of her anguish. A few of her friends—chiefly relatives of her mother—had attended Mr. Proby's funeral, and had done their best to learn of Sibylla as to the probable nature of her future prospects. But they were not people in whom she cared to repose confidence, even if the full particulars of her father's misfortune had been such as would have allowed her to communicate them with comfort. She told her friends that she did not expect, when her father's affairs were examined, to be left well off, and that she might possibly have to make some efforts to obtain a livelihood. She had always held aloof from her

friends, finding little congeniality in their society and tastes, and these friends were not surprised therefore, that she did not wish to be more communicative to them now. All her life long she had been an independent girl, and in the most trying crisis of her life she was minded to be as independent as ever.

That her silence was not regarded kindly by her inquisitive relatives may be well believed; and when they took their departure from Langbourne on the day immediately succeeding the funeral (several had gone directly the funeral was over, feeling no sentimental or worldly interest in the deceased man's will), they left Sibylla to shift for herself as she thought best. If she refused to be communicative, and thus shew that she was indifferent to their interest in her welfare, they couldn't help it. They had followed her father respectfully to the grave, and had discharged a social and honourable duty in a perfectly respectable manner. What could they do more?

Sibylla Proby was glad when they were gone; glad when she was left by herself to arrange,

undisturbed by their questions, for the future ; and she saw pretty clearly what the nature of that future would be.

She would be thrown on her own resources, and be compelled to do what thousands of girls have been compelled to do before her. She would have to rely upon her own brain and hands for her livelihood. Her path in life would be a hard one, and it was a path without end,—a dreary road, unrelieved during all its melancholy length by any patches of brightness, and issuing—she could see not where.

Thus she thought, when her resolution of breaking with Robert Evershed was uppermost in her mind. But this resolution was not always so determinedly fixed. She was but a woman—impulsively strong. She could go to no one for counsel, or for comfort. Since her childhood she had never been in the habit of relying on the wider experience, nor the stouter hearts of others. She had been guided by her own judgment ; she had trusted to the strength of her own spirits, and she had only these to trust to now. The kindest counsel of the ten-

derest hearted woman in the world would have been distasteful to Sibylla Proby at this time. Bitter as this crisis in her life was, she was prepared to pass through it, resting on herself, and herself alone. Yet she was weak ; despite her resolution to sever the relationship between herself and Robert, there were moments when she felt that she was unequal to such a task ; that if the separation came, it must come from him rather than from her. As the time approached nearer and nearer, when she felt it incumbent upon her to speak with decision upon her future relationship with him—a relationship which had had its late peculiar character given to it by conditions no longer in effect—the more difficult her task seemed.

Passionate, determined, self-reliant, self-guiding, Sibylla was tender when she was in the presence of Robert Evershed ; she was tender when she thought of him. Such companions of her own age as she chose to make, did not call her an affectionate girl, considerate, unselfish, self-denying with them, as she unquestionably was. But to Robert Evershed she

showed all that was most lovingly amiable in her disposition. With all her woman's best qualities, forgetfulness of self, purity, tenderness, involved in her regard for him, how could she then pronounce the words which must separate them, and sever her from his companionship and his love? And yet she must speak them. She had striven to win him by means that were unjustifiable—by means which had failed her now. She knew his position, his pride, his hope. Loving her, as she believed he did, she was not blind to the truth that he would not have asked her to become his wife, had it not been for that golden bribe, into which reality, alas, had not—not transformed the dream of James Hamperton, and of herself. Even if he were willing to make such a sacrifice as the taking of a poor wife entailed upon him, his mother's influence was strong enough to check him. And should he be unwilling to depart from his pledged word, and value Sibylla's love above all worldly consideration, what would that mother of his say, and how would she regard Sibylla as a daughter-in-law? She

guessed how she would be esteemed ; and shuddering as she thought of this, determined that the words which finally parted her and Robert should be spoken by herself, great as the task of speaking them might be.

One morning, some ten or twelve days after her father's death, she set out to walk to Langbourne Hall. When she was admitted, Robert, who was crossing the hall from the room in which his mother generally sat, advanced to meet her. After the servant who opened the door had gone, Sibylla said :—

“ I wish to speak with you alone. I have much to say.”

And they entered a room opposite Mrs. Evershed's.

Sibylla sat down and sighed wearily. Robert looked at her sorrowfully. What new grief was coming ?

“ How is your mother, Robert ?”

“ Ill—very ill. She has never recovered the shock of the fire—she never will !”

“ And you will lose much by it ?”

“ Yes, a great deal. I was silly enough not

to have insured, and I am reaping the harvest of my folly."

"Robert," said Sibylla, after a long pause ; "you can guess what I have come here to-day to tell you. You can guess what the meaning of my words was when we exchanged any lately, during this sad, dreary time."

Robert's face fell.

"I see you can, Robert. Oh, it is so bitter—it is so bitter ! Poor papa died almost penniless, and I have nothing, Robert—I have nothing !"

"Sibylla !"

"It is the wretched—wretched truth ! Business speculations, which were at one time in such a prosperous condition—prosperous even beyond my father's most sanguine hopes, suddenly failed—failed completely ; and in a moment he found himself a beggar ! I have come to tell you this : you can infer what my resolution, in consequence, is !"

"But——"

"You wish to know how it is that this disaster occurred ? Do not ask me ; do not ask

me. I am sick of the wretched story. The horrible details have burned themselves into my brain, and I shall be glad to forget them. What is done cannot be undone!"

"And have you had advice in your difficulties?"

"Oh, yes, Robert! The disaster was hopeless from the beginning."

"And you have come to tell me, Sibylla——" said Robert.

"——That we must part! Yes. I remember the words spoken by you, weeks ago. I know what the nature of the work before you is; and for your sake—for my own sake, I will be no burthen upon you."

"Sibylla! do not speak in this tone. One would think you never cared for me. You shall not carry your resolution into effect. Rather than surrender you, I would give up every hope I have in the world!"

"Stay," said Sibylla, slowly. "Think! You would not, Robert. No, indeed, you would not. I know you too well to believe, or hope that. You may fancy so now, in the bitter

moment of parting ; but a time would certainly come when you would regret that you had abandoned your purpose for my sake. You would regret it ! And I, knowing this, what should I do ?”

“ Sibylla ! Sihylla—this separation shall not—cannot take place.”

“ It can and must ! You are blinded now. Recal what you said to me—and in your heart of hearts you will say the same now. You have a hard (it may be a noble) work to achieve. It will require the dedication of all that is best in you for its accomplishment ;—it will render necessary an amount of self-denial, such as few would find themselves equal to ! A wife, unless she enjoyed the good fortune of being able to assist this work, would be denied the advantage, and the position which the wife of an Evershed should claim, and she would render the accomplishment of it more difficult, if she did not entirely imperil it. Does not this convey the meaning of the words you spoke to me in Wyndon Grove ?”

The meaning indeed ; but it was hard to endorse that meaning now.

“Sibylla—your determination is not fixed? If I revoke what I then said, if I say—‘Be my wife still: I will risk the future!’—Will you hold aloof?”

The struggle in her heart was a fierce one: she loved him; and her love was her life.

“I feel that I must, Robert. There is your mother——”

“My mother—she is not hard. Her life has been a bitter one—it has soured her temper; but at heart she is kind and generous. You are mistaken, Sibylla, if you think she is indifferent to you, or if you fancy that she has but one object, and for that, is ready to sacrifice every consideration. She has my welfare at heart: she has my happiness at heart.”

“Perhaps she has, Robert, for she cannot but have her own son’s happiness at heart; and perhaps she knows what your real happiness is, better than yourself. Let me see her, Robert, before I give you a final answer. If she wishes me to become your wife, I will obey her wishes; but if she only, in tone, or look, implies that she can regard me with no favour now, the resolu-

tion that I came here to-day with, must be fulfilled!"

Robert sighed, and a shade passed over his face.

"Ah! you fear what the verdict of your mother will be."

Without another word, they left the room, and crossed the hall into the apartment where Mrs. Evershed was sitting. Dreary at all times to Sibylla Proby, it was especially dreary now. Mrs. Evershed was looking much feebler. The shock of the fire had told on her greatly, and the fresh trouble that ensued had written additional lines of care upon her face.

She held out her hand to Sibylla, and gave her a welcome in a weak voice.

"So you have come again, Sibylla. Your poor father—I was sorry to hear of his death. It was sudden!"

"Sudden indeed!" Sibylla sighed, as she seated herself in the chair which Robert set for her.

"Mother," said Robert, with some hesitation, "Sibylla brings us bad news—though,

perhaps, in some respects it was not quite unexpected.

“Bad news !” said Mrs. Evershed ; “ ah ! I am always hearing that.”

As briefly as she could, Sibylla related the circumstances in which her father died, avoiding, of course, all mention of Hamperton, and saying nothing which could in any wise lead to the supposition that he was concerned in the disaster which befell Mr. Proby. Mrs. Evershed listened with seeming apathy, but said, when Sibylla had finished :—

“ I am sorry. I am very sorry. And you— ?”

Sibylla comprehended the significance of this question ; so did Robert.

“ Mother,” he said, with some anxiety, “ in spite of all that has happened, I do not relinquish my claim upon Sibylla. She was to have been my wife——”

“ But I cannot be it now,” Sibylla answered, interrupting him. She had had no hope that Mrs. Evershed would look with favour on her cause ; and her cold eye and unmoved voice convinced her, that her fears were right.

"And Miss Proby, did she come here to release you from your engagement, Robert?"

"She came here for that purpose, mother, but I——"

Mrs. Evershed interrupted him with uplifted finger, saying :—

"Miss Proby acts generously, and wisely, Robert! Nay—do not look angry with me. I have your interest at stake—I have made many sacrifices for you and for the name you bear. As a mother I have done this; and I can understand and appreciate the course Miss Proby has thought right to pursue."

"And you would have me allow her to make this sacrifice, pledged to her as I am?"

"The naked truth must be spoken, Robert. How will your means allow you to keep a wife, with any self-respect? with any respect for her? You are poor, Robert. There is no disguising the fact. You are poorer much than you were three weeks ago, before this fire happened. You will be poor as long as you live unless you have the firmness to adhere to your original line of conduct. I hope Miss Proby will forgive

my speaking in this tone ; but I know that she is no love-sick silly girl, who so long as her own passion is satisfied, is careless whether her husband is ruined or not by an imprudent marriage. She is experienced enough to see, as clearly as I can, that in the event of your marrying in the face of your present difficulties, you will bring misery on yourself ; and if you bring misery on yourself, can you help bringing misery on her ? On her ! Robert. Think of her as much as you think of yourself !”

So spoke Mrs. Evershed. The long dwelling on one wish had made her a monomaniac ; and in her narrow vision, she could not see her selfishness. The chastity of the nun, the asceticism of the monk, are all sublimely well in their way ; but in attaining this sublimity, may not both nun and monk step over and destroy a thousand other virtues, whose sum total is far greater than moral worth represented by unnatural chastity and a famished stomach ?

What would have been her chance of happiness, thought Sibylla, if she married this man,

loving him as she did, with his mother always present—bending his will to hers, and governing in all things.

“Miss Proby will not think very highly of us, mother, if I draw back from my engagement because she has met with misfortune. Oh, it is mean——”

“Mean?” said Mrs. Evershed, her voice a little heightened; “she will appreciate your motive too well, Robert.”

Sibylla had risen.

Robert looked at her, with knitted brow.

“Good-bye, Robert,” she said quietly, as she held out her hand towards him.

He made some movement as of deprecation; and, turning angrily to his mother, cried:—

“We shall both repent this, mother; I am sure of it.” Then to Sibylla—“This is most miserable.”

There was no irresolution on the face of the passionate girl: more than ever she felt that she would have only bought her husband.

“I will see you home,” said Robert, as she was bidding Mrs. Evershed farewell.

"No. I would rather you should not. Good-bye, again, Robert."

He turned away, and leaned his head against the mantelpiece; and felt that the whole business reflected small credit on himself. Mrs. Evershed looked at him with some show of pity in her eyes, but calmly. "You will get the better of this," she said, when Sibylla was gone, "we have all our troubles. You will be braced the better for your work by that which you are now going through."

And having administered this very questionable consolation, Mrs. Evershed drew her shawls the more closely around her; reclining backwards in her chair, and becoming silent.

Meanwhile Sibylla hurried home. Some strange strength had borne her up, but she knew the reaction would soon come. Almost the first thing she did upon reaching her home was to write, and dispatch that advertisement to the *Times* which had the good luck to find favour with Mr. Bryant. Then tears of anguish—wild, passionate, despairing—burst forth from her. But the world must

be faced, though she faced it with weeping eyes !

So it came to pass that in a few days she was facing the world in Messingham ; and but for the sorrow of her own heart she might have found comfort and peace there.

END OF BOOK THE SECOND.

BOOK THE THIRD.
DR. KEALWIN'S PROPERTY.

CHAPTER I.

OLIVIA REFERS TO THE PAST.

MORE than a month had passed. That unaccountable personage Mr. James Hamperton, whose business engagements rendered him unable for some time to pay attention to a note from Dr. Kealwin, hinting that he would soon be required to draw up that gentleman's will, was at last able to make his appearance at Messingham, and to execute the intentions of his friend. Years ago Mr. Hamperton would have gone down at once and done him the little service of embodying in satisfactory legal form his testamentary intentions, but as his business had now

undergone some considerable alteration in its character, he was less able to attend immediately to claims which were not directly connected with his present peculiar profession. Years ago he had been a solicitor, pure and simple (if these two epithets are applicable to such a personage), but he was something more now, and it would be very hard to describe exactly what he was. Had Dr. Kealwin said a word in his letter about wishing to have anything to do with the joint stock companies, whose business engaged the major part of James Hamperton's attention, James Hamperton would have paid the Doctor a visit forthwith. The making a will was a less profitable affair ; and Kealwin had to wait until his friend could disengage himself from his usual avocations, and attend to him.

This will-making the Doctor still regarded as a most admirable joke. He was in splendid health ; his constitution was one of those with which only an infinitesimal number of people are favoured. It was originally good, and it had been impaired by no excess. Moreover, to his great satisfaction only a few days ago a cele-

brated London physician, whose name is a bye-word for extended experience and marvelous success in his treatment of disease, had corroborated the happy Doctor's views concerning his own health, by saying that there was no reason why he should not live until he reached a hundred !

What a splendid joke it was, therefore, for a man of his health to make a will ! Such an action, he said looked like tantalizing death. His friends, if he had had many of them, might have interpreted this proceeding as a direct insult to themselves.

On the morning of the day which George Dampier Kealwin purposed devoting to his excellent joke, Mr. James Hamperton drove up in a dog-cart to the front door of Messingham Priory. Olivia and Georgine were both standing there dressed for walking, as the solicitor sprang from his vehicle.

Bowing to these ladies, he asked them whether Dr. Kealwin was in the house with Mr. Bryant.

"No," answered Georgine; "he was here

about an hour ago, but went home, because he expected two or three friends. He thought very likely that you would drive here, Mr. Hamperton, and when you had seen papa, you were to go, he said, to his house."

"Oh, indeed. And the Doctor's in capital spirits, eh?"

"Capital; I never knew him merrier: it is quite amusing to hear him talk about his will. I've been trying to get out of him who he's going to leave his money to, but he won't say a word. Isn't Mr. Evershed some relative of his?"

"Yes, but you mustn't question me further. Indeed, I scarcely know what my friend's intentions are. I am to see your papa, am I not?"

"Yes; he's to be what you call an executor, I think."

"Of course. You are going for a walk, I see, so I won't keep you waiting here."

"Oh, by-the-way, Mr. Hamperton," said Georgine, as she and her sister were walking away, "you are to sleep here to-night. The

Doctor has two or three friends whom he must entertain at his house, and he knew you would excuse his throwing you on our hospitality."

"Excuse him! I shall thank him for it," was Mr. Hamperton's gallant response.

Olivia had said but little; she was much quieter than usual—a fact which Mr. Hamperton perceived. Turning to her, he said—

"I saw Mrs. Calley yesterday, and knowing that I was to visit Messingham to-day, she sent you her kindest love, Mrs. Prince."

"I'm sure I'm much obliged to her. She is quite well?"

"Quite."

Mrs. Prince's eyes had been roving listlessly from object to object; they fixed themselves now upon Mr. Somerton's entering the garden on horseback. The appearance of a gentleman whose relationship with her the world had construed into one of a peculiarly tender nature might have chased the look of gloom from the lady's face, but, strange to say, it had no such effect now. Perceiving who it was that had entered, Mr. Hamperton smiled and said—

"I will detain you no longer ; Mr. Bryant, I shall find, I suppose, in the library." And when he had given orders to the servant in charge of the dog-cart, in which he had driven over from St. Belcham's, he entered the house. At the same time Mr. Somerton rode up. In a few minutes he was sauntering across the lawn with the ladies, in the direction of the plantations.

Whether Mr. Somerton was at all depressed before he saw Olivia Prince I know not, but he had not been in her society long before his countenance became very melancholy. She cared but little to talk, and Mr. Somerton could see clearly enough that his society was not at this moment cared for. It was so rarely that Mrs. Prince was otherwise than light-hearted and talkative. He tried to interest her in various themes, but he failed in all. His *repertoire* of conversational subjects had never been extensive ; and when he had discussed the last cricket match, in which he shone illustriously as the winner of seven-and-twenty runs, or the last croquet match, rendered notable by some

marvellously successful stroke on his part, or the last ball, or the last sensational romance, Mr. Somerton found his well dry. He then fell back on the weather. The weather is an elastic subject, but even that cannot be stretched for ever, as the gentleman found to his discomfort. Suddenly it occurred to him that there was a subject still remaining which had not engaged his attention, and he seized it.

"I did not see your sister's new governess yesterday, nor your sister," he said.

"My sister has gone out again for her health. She is never well here, and Miss Proby has accompanied her. She has been without a governess so long, that papa did not like her to lose any further time, even though it was thought better that she should leave Messingham, for the cause I have named."

"And where has your sister gone? To the sea-side?"

"No, to Haystone, in Hertfordshire. We have some friends there, who are friends also of the Doctor; and he said that the air there, being different to this, would just suit Emily.

So we despatched her and Miss Proby as soon as possible. Emily is very delicate, and is never well when she's at home."

"Miss Proby is a very fine girl," commented Mr. Somerton.

"And a very clever one," added his companion.

"Did I not hear something of her being, or having been, engaged, to that gentleman who was staying with the Doctor, some two or three months ago?"

"You mean Mr. Evershed. There was some talk about it, but I don't know the particulars. Indeed, I believe there was no engagement."

Olivia walked on silently, Mr. Somerton sauntering by her side. Georgine kept at some distance, swinging her parasol. When they reached the plantations, they all sat down upon some seats placed there; but the party did not increase in gaiety, and Mr. Somerton felt very uncomfortable.

About an hour after Mr. Hamperton first entered the Priory to see Mr. Bryant, he reappeared, and skirted the gardens towards the

plantations, as there was a short cut through them to the Doctor's house. Before he left the garden, he was met by Mr. Somerton, alone.

"What! have you left the ladies?" was Mr. Hamperton's enquiry, as he shook hands with this young gentleman.

"Yes. I didn't seem to get on very well this morning; so I didn't stay with them long."

"Ah! my dear young friend, you are not the first who has not found the loved one at all times satisfactory. Women are erratic. When they like a man most, they plague him the most devilishly. I've found it so, more than once. And so, the charming Mrs. Prince was cold—was she?"

Arthur gave a somewhat dismal nod in answer.

"Ah! the best of 'em are, at times. But don't be down-hearted. Put up with a few whims and caprices. A woman is such a supremely grand and delightful creature, that any amount of humbug must be forgiven her!"

And with these words Mr. Hamperton sprang

aside, and advanced quickly towards the plantations, thinking as he went along :—

“How the deuce can Mrs. Prince—adorable woman—regard that ass with any favour? Treats him a little coldly to-day, does she? Ah! perhaps that means mischief! I shouldn’t wonder if she turned the fellow off at the last moment!”

He had reached the plantations now, and was taking a path that would bring him out close to the Doctor’s house. It was moss-grown, and as he walked, his footfalls were scarcely heard. He had not gone far, before he came in sight of Olivia Prince and Georgine Bryant, and he would have walked up to them at once, but something which Olivia said arrested his attention, causing him to halt almost before he was aware of it. All at once he remembered what accident had revealed to him months ago of Olivia Prince; and accident was revealing more to him of what he had then only caught some faint glimpse.

Where he now stood, two paths branched off. The left was his; in the other the ladies were

sitting. The two formed an acute angle. Advancing some yards along the one leading in the direction of Dr. Kealwin's, he placed himself behind the trunk of a tree, to be as much as possible out of observation; and here he was able to hear distinctly all that Olivia Prince was saying to her sister in the other path.

For some time after the departure of Mr. Somerton, both had been silent. Georgine was the first to speak.

"Well, Olivia, I must say that you've not been very gracious to-day with Arthur."

"Haven't I? Perhaps not. I've lately felt it a rather difficult matter to be gracious with him."

"Do you say this, Olivia? I thought you were gracious to everybody. Poor Arthur! he's gone away looking very uncomfortable."

"He'll soon recover."

"I don't believe you care for him, Olivia!"

"Don't you? Well, I never said I did."

"Why have you accepted him, then?"

"I have not accepted him."

"But you can scarcely get away from your engagement now?"

"Can't I? I beg your pardon!"

"But would you do so?"

Olivia only raised her eyebrows in reply.

"You will get yourself a very bad name if, after all the encouragement you have given him, you turn him the cold shoulder at the last moment."

"How anxious you are, Georgine, about my reputation! I never got an ill name yet, and I don't suppose I shall win such distinction, even if I do think fit to give Mr. Somerton a final 'No' one of these days."

"Did you ever care for anybody, Olivia?" asked Georgine. "One would think you never had. You give me credit for being ambitious, vain, and I know not what; but bad as I am, I think I am capable, at least, of loving sincerely, when I do love. I would never play with anybody!"

"I'm glad to hear you say so! I must confess that you have revealed an unselfishness of character, of which I was in entire ignorance

until this moment. I only trust you will always act up to your present standard of good conduct. As for me——”

Olivia sneered sarcastically, and was silent.

“As for you,” replied Georgine, “you can never know what it is to love! Never, Olivia!”

“Can I not?”

“No. You never loved, and you never will love!”

“Indeed. You say this because I do not care for this Arthur Somerton. Little you know me, Georgine. Never loved!”

There was something in this tone of voice which provoked Georgine’s curiosity, and turning quickly on her sister, she said—

“You have loved then? And I have never known it?”

“Yes—I have. Earnestly—devotedly; as I shall never—never love again!”

“But when? When was this?”

“When I was in India.”

“You have guarded your secret well, Olivia. I never guessed it!”

“And you would not, if I had not confessed

it myself. What made me confess I know not; unless it was that you taunted me with being colder-hearted than I am."

"And you have been so silent, Olivia. Why could you not have made a confidante of me—your sister?"

"Because I wanted no confidante."

"But now that you have told me so much—will you tell me no more?"

"The story can do you no good, Georgine."

"How do you know that? It at least may amuse me."

"Amuse you," said Olivia, the light springing to her eyes. "Amuse you? You fancy I shall be the heroine of an interesting romance. Well—a romance it was perhaps; only in violation of their general principles, it ended most unhappily!"

Georgine never remembered having heard her sister speak as she was now speaking. The world had accredited Mrs. Prince with a character, one feature of which was a charming indifference to loving, or being loved in earnest,—and Georgine's view had coincided with that of the world.

"I confess what you have said surprises me very much. Unless you follow it up by telling me more, I shall wish that you had said nothing!"

"I dare say," was Mrs. Prince's answer. "How strange it seems to me to be referring to a subject which I have always kept locked in my own bosom."

"It is strange too for me to listen to you speaking in such a solemn tone," laughed Georgine. "But come—tell me the whole story. You can rely upon me for keeping it secret. Surely you may tell your sister, though you might not care to tell anyone else."

"Well, Georgine, now that I have said so much, I suppose I must say more. I need not tell you to listen, for I see you are. When I went out to India with my husband, you know perhaps as well as I do the feelings with which I regarded him. Giddy, worldly as I was—eager to shine—to be admired—I had sense enough to respect, though I never loved him. He was a good man, and always treated me with kindness, to which no woman

—not even the worst—could be indifferent. I was very happy with my husband, and did my duty by him honestly and fairly enough. The first few months of my life in India were one round of gaieties. I led an existence of intoxicating happiness. I had a most perfect liberty. My society was courted,—I was admired,—flattered! I had everything which my worldly heart craved for. Gay as I was, the same sense which made me respect my husband, caused me to know that those with whom I chiefly associated, were in many cases little deserving of respect. In my moments of sober reflection—for I had these moments sometimes—I fully recognised the fact that in my heart of hearts I really cared very little for those whom I had drawn around me as friends. Women envied, and men flattered me; and if indifferent to the envy of the one sex, and gratified by the flattery of another, I valued both at their true worth. It is scarcely necessary for me to say that I flirted. And perhaps you know enough of me, Georgine, to be sure that my flirtations never had any very serious halo. Men said they loved me; and I

laughed in their faces ! I had a joyous time of it—my husband never complained ; and my conscience never rebuked me for any serious misdemeanour ! Suddenly my career came to an end : my husband died after a short illness. My friends, who had eyes keen enough to know the amount of real regard I had for him, were curious to know what I should do now. He had not been dead long before I received an offer of marriage. This offer was refused, and was soon followed by a second, which met with the fate of the first. After awhile, to my great astonishment, I heard by accident that a gentleman, an officer, whose name was associated with a very different world to mine, loved me, and only delayed asking me to become his wife until a suitable time had elapsed since my husband's death. He had been first introduced to me by Mr. Prince, and was a widely different man to the officers who used generally to hang about me, and to whisper their soft nothings in my ear. I had heard a good deal of him, before I knew him, from officers in his own regiment, who, though utterly

unlike him, always spoke of him with respect. He was a serious man,—I should say a religious man. While his brother officers were at balls and parties, he was most likely by the bedside of some sick or dying soldier. The privates adored him. He taught those who could not read,—he rescued many a man from irredeemable evil;—wherever he went he did good. On Sunday he used to gather around him in his own room at the barracks as many men as cared to hear him read or pray. ‘Praying Crossley,’ his enemies nick-named him; but these were few. During my husband’s life I always felt a sort of awe of him, for I knew that he could not approve of all I did and said. More than once after I had seen him, I wished that my world was his; but of course that wish left me just where it found me.”

It was at this moment that Mr. Hamperton caught sight of the ladies, and soon afterwards, struck by what Olivia Prince was saying, halted, and made himself master of her confession. Nothing gratified this singular individual more than when he could combine sentiment with

business. A flirtation with a pretty widow, whose money he desired to see invested in something which returned a larger per-centage than its present appropriation brought in, spiced the business charmingly ; and now, whilst bent on seeing Kealwin, and listening to his intentions with regard to the final disposition of his property, he enjoyed the satisfaction of prefacing real work with a little romance.

“ You may fancy, Georgine,” her sister said, “ what my surprise was when I heard that Major Crossley was in love with me, and purposed asking me to become his wife ! Mingled with my surprise was a sense of shame. What was I ? What was not he ? Sometimes I wondered whether he really knew what I was—whether he was aware how worldly my life had been, how different from that of a woman whom a man of his character would select for a wife ! I know not whether I wished that he had been deceived,—or whether I most desired that, knowing all, he should still think I was worthy of taking his name.”

“ Then you loved him, Olivia ?” said Georgine.

“Yes,” was Mrs. Prince’s answer ; “I loved him. You are astonished, I see. Well you may be. I should tell you that the person who gave me to understand what his intentions were, was an elderly relative of his own, in whom he placed confidence, and from whom he solicited advice in the matter ; so that his intentions were unknown, save to those who were directly interested in him. Great indeed would have been the wonderment, had it been generally known that Major Crossley was desirous of making that fashionable widow, Mrs. Prince, his wife !”

“Crossley ! Ah !” thought Hamperton ; “the man whose portrait I saw in the newspaper !”

“It seems curious,” said Georgine, “that if you liked Major Crossley, and if he liked you, you two didn’t marry.”

“Wait till you have heard all. Time passed on. I had been a widow a year, having lived, as you know, the twelvemonth of my widowhood with an aunt of my husband’s. During that twelvemonth I saw Major Crossley frequently. I had been a widow about thirteen

months, when he asked me to be his wife. I told him I was unworthy of the honour which he sought to confer upon me—as indeed I was. Though I loved him—though I valued his love above every earthly consideration, I was as worldly as ever—as much Olivia Bryant, or Olivia Prince, as you have ever seen me. Good, noble, as he was, and appreciating, as I did, the work which was always mentioned, with his name, I had a supreme conviction that I was no fit wife for him, and a fear that the day would come when he would know this to his pain, as much as I knew it then to my humiliation! He listened to all that I had to say, and answered me in these words:—‘I am prepared to risk much for your love. In saying that you are unworthy of me, you do yourself injustice. If you love me, as I think you do, or may, do not, for any other reason, say that you will not be my wife.’ How my heart thrilled as I heard him say this. Again and again I said I loved him, and that if he would take me in my unworthiness, I would strive my best to be the wife he merited, though I knew

my sincerest efforts would fall far short of such a wisely standard as he could justly claim in the one he chose !”

For a moment or two Olivia ceased speaking.

“ Even I must say that women are unfathomable,” reflected Hamperton. “ My experience amongst the sex prepared me for a good deal, but certainly not for discovering that the worldly, easy-going Mrs. Prince was ever in love with a saint, or that she was ever near becoming a saint herself ! Oh ! woman ! what a riddle she is ! I’m over fifty, and I haven’t solved her yet !”

“ Go on,” said Georgine to her sister ; “ I am so anxious to hear the end.”

Olivia resumed.

“ Well—we were engaged. I was to be his wife, and I did my best to become indifferent to my old life—to break, as well as I could, from my old friends. Our engagement, for some cause, was not made public, and those who knew me, wondered at the change which had taken place in me.”

“ I suppose you are going to tell me,” said

Georgine, "that you found the moral task you had set before you too hard to be accomplished, and that Major Crossley was disappointed in his hopes of being able to convert you ; whereupon your happy dream of love, and of a sober life, came to an end?"

"I'm going to tell you nothing of the kind, Georgine. Soon after our engagement, Major Crossley and his regiment were called to another station. The pacification of India was at parts incomplete, and he was obliged to depart suddenly. At the time of his departure, it was thought that he would soon be able to return. In that hope I bade him farewell. As regularly as we could, we corresponded. Suddenly his letters ceased, and in a short time I heard that he had been killed!"

"Killed! Killed in action?"

"Yes—in action. At Aurungabad there was disaffection amongst some native troops ; and in endeavouring to quell it, he was shot!"

"And then, Olivia?"

"And then? You can guess what happened. I was stunned, and I scarcely knew

what I did. But, as soon as possible, I made arrangements for leaving. What was there to keep me in India? In less than a month from the time when I heard of Major Crossley's death, I had embarked for England. I did my best to forget the happy dream which had ended so disastrously; and how soon I found myself returning to my old tone of thought and habit! What I was when I reached my home again, you know! What I am now, you know! I made one earnest effort to be better and truer; I failed, when I lost the object which had inspired my effort. And here I am now, Georgine—worldly, careless—perhaps a little something worse than when Egerton Crossley first saw me, and, in loving me, made me try to be worthy of his love!"

"*Sic transit gloria!*" thought Hamperton. "Husband and lover both dead, and wife and mistress resigned to the inevitable. *Che sarà sarà!*"

"You are the first person, Georgine, that I have ever spoken to on this dismal story. Indeed, I have tried to think about it as little as

possible. I am so different to what I might have been."

"But Mrs. Calley—your friend," said Georgine; "surely she has heard this?"

"Mrs. Calley is the last person I should tell. I remember some time since her asking me a few trenchant questions, which brought the past to my memory, and my betraying more emotion than I wished; but she gained nothing from me, and is not likely to do so. I remember, too, a curious incident happening when Mr. Hamperton was here before——"

"It's coming now," thought that gentleman, from his place of concealment.

"One evening he asked me to get the 'Illustrated' of a certain year, which contained an engraving of some invention he wanted to see. Curiously enough in the same page with it was a portrait of Egerton Crossley, who had distinguished himself somewhere before in a brilliant action. What strange emotions flooded my heart, as I saw the well-known features once more! And now, he is dead!"

"Are you quite sure of that?" thought

Hamperton. "During the mutiny and afterwards, there were reports of a good many deaths, which after facts falsified."

"You have surprised me," said Georgine; "you are the last person, Olivia, who, in my opinion, would have indulged in such a grand passion, and resolved all those fine things on the strength of it."

With something like a laugh, Olivia replied—

"Fine things, indeed! see what they've come to! I lead on a young man, for whom I don't care a pin, to fall desperately in love with me; and when I have been bored by him enough, I give him the cold shoulder by way of a preface to a final 'cut.'"

"And do you really intend serving poor Arthur as you have served the rest?"

"As I have served the rest: the lawyer, the parson, and the rich landed proprietor, rejoicing in the name of Brown. Really I wasn't to blame in their case, though, perhaps, I am a little in Arthur's. Heigho!"

"And you confess that you don't care for him?"

"Of course I confess it."

Then Olivia and Georgine arose. Hearing their movements, Hamperton hurried on, cogitating on what he had heard, and airing his cogitations now and then by some such expression as this—

"Oh, woman! woman! you sphinx in the form of a Venus!"

CHAPTER II.

SHOWING THAT IT WAS WELL DR. KEALWIN
HAD MADE HIS WILL.

WHEN Hamperton reached the Doctor's, he saw that gentleman, with three or four friends, walking about the garden.

Catching sight of the solicitor, Kealwin cried out—

“Here you are at last, then! I'm glad to see you! I thought you would have been here before. You must have been loitering on the road with some pretty girl. Let me introduce you to my friends—all of them old ones, though I haven't seen much of 'em lately.” Pointing

to three middle-aged worthies, he named them respectively—"Gresham, Laver, and Rayleigh. This,"—and here his finger was directed towards Hamperton, "is one of my oldest—I don't know whether I can say my best—friends. I knew him when he was a good deal better than he is now. His name is James Hamperton, and his business here to-day is to make my will. You, Rayleigh, have agreed to be executor with Bryant (you won't have much to do yet); and you, Gresham and Laver, are to witness the signing of my last will and testament. That's your work, gentlemen. Will-making is generally a rather sombre business; mine shall be nothing of the kind. We'll have a capital dinner after it, and after that some of the best wine I have in my cellar, and I'll lay a wager—and a heavy one—that there is no better wine in England."

So the pleasant Doctor spoke, as he and his friends sauntered about his garden. It was a lovely garden, with parterres bright with autumn flowers, serpentine paths, on which, for the special occasion, fresh gravel had been laid down;

shady trees ; statues gleaming here and there amongst the shrubbery ; and a lawn as smooth as velvet. The Doctor prided himself both on its beauty and productiveness. Great was his triumph when he could boast that he had cut a bundle of asparagus before his neighbours. Wonderful his exultation when his gigantic potatoes carried away the first prize at a fashionable county flower show ; and when his roses, as they invariably did, beat those of professional growers.

"What a pity it is you haven't a wife," cried Hamperton, as he gazed admiringly on the pleasantness of the Doctor's garden.

And Gresham, Laver, and Rayleigh exclaimed in chorus—

"Yes ; what a pity it is, Doctor !"

"And you say this on the day that I am going to make my will," laughed Kealwin ; "that's rather too good a joke, to rally a man for not having a wife, when he is preparing for his final dissolution by solemnly drawing up his testamentary intentions. A wife, indeed ! Well, young as I am in health and spirits, if I had

wanted a wife, I should have taken one twenty-five years ago."

"It's not too late now," said Gresham.

"When people marry at my age they marry for the sake of a nurse, or, at least, to have somebody that may look after them in their little ailments. I'm happy to say I don't want a nurse, or anybody to make me gruel."

"Yes, your health is wonderful," exclaimed Kealwin's three friends, in a voice which plainly said that theirs was by no means first rate, and that they were envious of the happy, hearty-looking Doctor.

When the Doctor's friends had seen all that was to be seen in the pretty garden, they returned with him to the house, and soon afterwards Mr. Bryant appeared.

"We dine at six," said Kealwin, "but there is luncheon for those who wish it. All I say to you is, if you eat lunch don't eat too much, for I've got a capital dinner in preparation for you, and one, moreover, which has been got up by a professional cook."

Mr. Hamperton, whose appetite was always

good, sat down to a well-spread table, and made himself comfortable with the good things he found there ; one or two more followed his example, but the luncheon did not occupy much time.

This slight refreshment over, Kealwin proposed to show his friends over his house ; after which, it was his intention to adjourn to dictate to Hamperton the particulars of his will. The good taste of Kealwin was exceptional, as every arrangement in his house proved. It was not large, but its size had been turned to the best advantage. It looked well at all times, and on the present occasion the owner was minded that its general attractiveness should be more than usually conspicuous.

The drawing-room was a little paradise, full of articles excellent in design, and costly in price ; and from the window there was a lovely scene of sloping pasture, woods green in the mass, but tinged here and there with autumn yellow, and pleasant homesteads dotting the landscape.

“What you are looking on has only one

fault," said Kealwin, "and that fault I have taken steps to remedy. You see that wood there," pointing to one about a mile from his house; "it's very pretty, as you may remark, but it hides a view, which I can't afford to lose for the sake of the wood, green and pretty as it is; I have therefore bought the farm to which it belongs. The farm is but a small one, some fifty or sixty acres in all; and now that I am master of it, my intention is to stub the wood, and thus destroy what intercepts a most splendid view from this window. Next year, if you come, you will find me in the full enjoyment of what this room would command were it not for that one little wood. I dare say," added the Doctor, "if any of you were gifted with a talent for moral reflection, you would advert to the folly of my making a will, and at the same time taking steps to secure the enjoyment of an uninterrupted view from my drawing-room window, more particularly as I had seized such a theme for improving the occasion when one of you said that I ought to have a wife."

Laughing and talking, the Doctor passed from room to room, calling attention every minute to some article of furniture or adornment, which bespoke his excellent taste and his long purse.

"I don't suppose," said Hamperton, gazing at some splendid porcelain vases, "that I shall ever live to see these things come to the hammer, but I can fancy the excitement there will be amongst the English connoisseurs for this sort of thing some forty or fifty years hence. Some journal will call the attention of its readers to a certain sale, whereat the articles of vertu collected by the late estimable Doctor Kealwin were sold for fabulous prices ! Though I make your will, Doctor, I shall never live to see these pretty things sold."

Arriving at the library, they found one side of the apartment, hitherto unoccupied, filled up with a large new book-case, which was, however, empty yet of books. The shelves in the other part of the room were laden with the literature of every country and of all ages ; every book being bound, with elaborate taste.

Pointing to the shelves which had yet to be filled up, Kealwin said :—"I intend placing there the literature of the last five years ; the books are now being bound, and when in their places will make the apartment look finished. What I should do when I have filled every side of the room, I don't know ; but I expect I shall be compelled to build out at the side."

Wherever Kealwin took his friends about his residence, there were evidences of work which had been done yesterday, and work which was to be done to-morrow. This cabinet had been bought only last week ; this recess was to be filled up in a few days with a vase, a statue, a something which seemed fitted for it. Here was a series of pictures, three or four of which were wanting, but which were soon to be supplied. There some expensive nick-nacks which had only arrived a morning or two ago from London. Though the Doctor was about to make his will that day, everything in his house shewed that his interest in life was as keen as ever, and that he was expecting to live many years longer, and enjoy what he had in his possession.

The ground floor, and up-stairs rooms inspected, Dr. Kealwin conducted his friends to his cellar. They looked with wonder on the well stocked bins, in which reposed wines of rarest qualities—vintages which cannot be purchased for love or money now, and brands, which had no rival save at some European court, or in Rothschild's cellar.

Being a genial, self-indulgent man, George Dampier Kealwin was very proud of his cellar, and never tired of giving any one who might inspect it histories of the sources whence he had been able to get such capital wine. Every bin had its separate history; and if he was proud of his rare editions of books, he was not less proud of his rare assortment of wines.

"You've a capital task in store for you—the emptying of the cellar before you die, Kealwin," said Hamperton. "I only hope your successor here may find as good a stock of wines when he is master of it as you have got in it now."

"I very much fear whether he will," laughed Kealwin, "though I try as well as I can to replenish it with the best that can be got. And

now, gentlemen, I think our tour of inspection is over. The Egyptians, we are told, in order that they might be reminded of their mortality, during their most festive moments, used to have a death's head gleaming ghastly amidst flowers on their banquet table. And in a similar spirit I make my will, when I'm in the best of health and my wine cellar is at the fullest."

Shortly afterwards, Dr. Kealwin, accompanied by Mr. Hamperton, and the two gentlemen who were to act as his executors (whenever their services might be required), entered the library, whilst the two, who were to officiate as witnesses to this will, sauntered to the garden for a smoke.

"When I want you, I'll call," said Kealwin laughing. "You'll find cigars and sherry in the dining-room. And" (this to a servant who happened to be passing), "dinner to be precisely at six o'clock. Tell the cook this. I shall have plenty of time to ice the wines when I've made my will," he added, as he shut the library door.

Sauntering about the garden, with cigars in their mouths, and chatting upon the genial

eccentricity of their friend, Messrs. Gresham and Laver heard a good deal of laughter float from the open window of the apartment where Kealwin was giving James Hamperton his instructions with regard to the will; and again and again the sententious mellow voice of the solicitor was heard, as he made suggestions to his friend, or commented upon what that gentleman said. Never was a will made more merrily; and well might Kealwin say that the circumstances attending the execution of his, rendered the affair a joke with Death. Several times during the afternoon, the popping of champagne corks was heard. As the Doctor told Gresham and Laver when they made their appearance, in answer to a summons, to attest the signing of the will, "each legatee had been honoured by a separate bottle; and now we must give one a-piece to the executors and the witnesses."

So Kealwin's will was made, signed, and witnessed; and the Doctor, having placed the precious document in his pocket, was enjoying a cabana on the strength of it.

"Well, Hamperton," said Kealwin, as the two were alone a few minutes before dinner, "do you think I have acted fairly? When I'm no more, those who knew Dr. Kealwin, won't say he's a humbug, will they?"

"No: I think not. The terms of your will will find favour with everybody."

"Only," said Kealwin, "there is every probability that a good many years will elapse before this takes place."

"And you don't, I suppose, intend to drop any hints of what you've done?"

"Certainly not; or people will be wishing that I was dead; and I'm selfish enough to desire to live as long as I can, and enjoy what I have, unmoved by the envious eyes of those who will have my money when I have no more need for it!"

The dinner, which soon took place (to which another guest had come in the person of Lester Temple), was a great success; the Doctor being genial and witty, and Mr. James Hamperton, courteous, sentimental, and business-like by turns. The dishes were most *recherché*;

many of them the latest specimens of French gastronomic imagination. Dr. Kealwin read Brillat Savarin, as well as Honoré de Balzac; and knew what appetising heights various articles of food may reach, by admirable cooking and delicate sauces.

Immediately opposite the host was a very singular old-fashioned silver cup, which the Doctor had bought years ago in Germany. Some Teutonic Benvenuto Cellini had given weird exercise to his fancy by chasing on it a hideous death's head, with a crown of vine leaves; and it was in this cup, suitable, as the the eccentric Doctor thought, for the present occasion, that his guests were to drink his health.

The toast was entrusted to the hands of Mr. Hamperton, and that gentleman performed his task to admiration. Towards the end of his speech he took occasion to dwell upon the importance arising from making a will, in ways that might be unsuspected. " 'Avoid excursion trains,' says a will. 'Don't bathe after dinner.' 'Eschew suppers.' 'Don't sleep in damp

sheets.' And, 'Don't drink new port wine.' And now 'the health of George Dampier Kealwin, and may we enjoy his friendship and his hospitality for many years to come!'"

The Doctor responded in a humorous speech, and the wine went round right merrily.

The dinner had been over some hours, and still the bottle went round. James Hamperton's powers of consumption were anything but contemptible, and on the present occasion they were tested to the uttermost,—with significant effects in a very flushed face and a very noisy voice. Of all the party, Dr. Kealwin was the least moved; genial, placid, and talkative always, he was only genial, placid, and talkative now.

"Hamperton, tell a story," said Kealwin.

"I will, when the host has set the example," responded James Hamperton.

"I'm sorry to say I'm a poor hand at storytelling."

"I don't believe it, Kealwin. Come, something, old fellow. A youthful experience."

"I've forgotten my youthful experiences, as you call them."

"Hum—bug!" was Hamperton's courteous reply. "Open confession is good for the soul. Do your soul good by confessing. Pass the bottle."

Having refilled his glass, Hamperton resumed—

"You've been a gay bachelor; during your long bachelorhood you surely have been the hero of a good many romances. Let's hear again all about that little French girl—what's her name? You told me the story once—years ago. Tell us the story again."

A shade of displeasure passed over the Doctor's usually quiet face. Hamperton saw it, and comprehended it. Upon this subject Kealwin was not to be joked, and then Hamperton suddenly called to mind that when he had dined with the Doctor some time ago, this had

been brought up, and had slightly disturbed the equanimity of the host.

"All right," he said, nodding his head; "I see. Well, Kealwin, if you won't tell a story, and Laver won't, and Gresham won't, and Bryant won't, I will. Now for a sensation. I'm haunted!"

"Haunted!" echoed all.

"Yes, unmistakably so."

"By what?—A woman, a creditor, or the deuce himself?" were the questions from all sides.

"Not by a woman," Hamperton replied, with mock solemnity, "nor by a creditor, and, I hope, not by the devil; I'm haunted by a man! How slowly this bottle goes round."

"Fill up Hamperton's glass, so that he's not interrupted in his story," cried Kealwin.

"Well, gentlemen, as before remarked, I'm haunted by a man, and I've been haunted by him for some weeks past. When I had occasion to leave London suddenly some time ago, a person called at my house wanting particularly to see me. I was not at home. He said he

would call the next day. The next day came, and he didn't; the next, and the next, and so on, and still he didn't call. Just a fortnight afterwards I went to my office late—past one o'clock it was, for I had business which detained me in the city—stop, I must tell you one thing which I had forgotten. This man, so my wife said, was marvellously like myself; and my clerk, when I appeared at my office on the occasion just referred to, greeted me with a wonderful story as to a person having been waiting to see me all the morning, and had only just gone, who, curiously enough, very much resembled me. Who could this fellow be? He promised to call, so my clerk said, on the morrow. The morrow came, and he didn't call! I heard nothing more of my mysterious friend (fill up my glass, please,) until yesterday, when I was at St. Belcham's. The railway which is now being made from there often requires my attendance, and I was there on business. Just as I was taking my candle at the inn to go to bed, a waiter told me that a person had been enquiring for me several times during

the day, when I was engaged with the contractor. This person seemed to hold some inferior post in connection with the railway, but the waiter didn't know what. Grinning at me, the fellow said, 'The party is very much like you, sir.' Well, here was a game! I was haunted by my double! Who the devil was my double?"

"I wouldn't be in your skin for something," laughed Kealwin. "This is an omen, Hamperton. If you havn't made your will, I should advise you to do so at once. You may depend upon it you are wanted down below."

Listening to this story, Lester Temple pricked up his ears; and when the clatter of laughter was over at Dr. Kealwin's remark, he said—

"It is very curious, but I have seen somebody very much like you, Mr. Hamperton. When I first saw him I could not recal who it was he so greatly resembled, for I had but met you once on the deck of the Boulogne and Folkstone boat. However, upon re-meeting you at the Priory, I recalled the face of the person

which had so much puzzled me, and knew that it was you whom he was so much like."

"Who was this person?" enquired Hamperton, with animation.

"I don't know; he was a stranger to me. Do you remember seeing him, Dr. Kealwin? You were with me at the time."

"I don't recollect him; and if he bore so great a resemblance to Mr. Hamperton as you say he did, I should unquestionably have recollected him."

"Strange to say," Lester Temple observed, "he was taken very ill after I left; and my mother and a young lady who lives with her, were very kind to him. He was quite a stranger in that part of the country, and seemed to have little money. These particulars I gathered from the letters received by me from home."

"Resembles me, you say?"

"Yes, Mr. Hamperton."

"Possibly he may be my importunate friend. The story gets quite interesting. Go where I will, I hear that my double is on the look out for me. Does he leave any message?"

No. Yesterday I determined that I would make a few enquiries about my mysterious friend. I could hear nothing. Some fresh hands had lately come from London, I was told by one of the contractor's men ; but they had left early in the morning to repair one of the bridges, seven or eight miles from St. Belchams, which had fallen in. As I had to come over to Messingham to-day, I could not stay long at St. Belcham's making enquiries after my double ; but I left word at the inn, where I slept last night, that, if anybody called for me, he was to be told, I had gone to Dr. Kealwin's, at Messingham ; but that I should leave to-morrow for London. My double hasn't followed me here yet, Doctor : but, should he come to-morrow, pray tell him where I am."

"Of course I will," said Kealwin ; "what a strange story !" And again, and again, the bottle went round.

It was nearly one o'clock. Dr. Kealwin was alone. Mr. Hamperton and Mr. Bryant had left for the Priory, about ten minutes : and his

three friends, wisely thinking that bed was the best place for them in their condition, had retired thither before. The Doctor was as placid and unmoved as ever. One or two of his guests had taken a little supper; and its remains, with glasses, plates, knives, and forks were still on the table. There they would remain until the morning, for the housekeeper and the servants had long gone to bed.

Taking a paper from his pocket,—it was his will,—Dr. Kealwin glanced through it. Then, when he had re-folded it, and placed it in a drawer at the side table, he said :—“ I think I have acted fairly. I don't want to be thought a hard man : though (and he laughed a gentle laugh) there isn't much chance of my friends reaping the benefit of my good action for some years to come ! ”

He looked up toward the window ! what a grand, bright night it was ! Perhaps its serenity, or some slight earnest thought, running through the joke of the day, touched him : for he looked a little less of the merely good-natured Pagan.

Suddenly there was a figure standing at the window, shutting out the sweet view before it.

"What Hamperton—are you back again?" cried Kealwin; for the man's face strongly resembled that of the gentleman who had just gone.

The figure did not speak: but opened the window and entered.

Then Kealwin remembered the story of Hamperton's double.

"What do you want?" asked the Doctor.

This time, the figure, advancing towards Kealwin, spoke.

In the morning, when one of the servants, up later than usual, entered the dining-room, she saw an object there, which made her start and shriek, and rush out.

George Dampier Kealwin's end had come many years before he had expected it, and by means he had never feared.

He was lying with his back upon the hearth-rug: and the murderer's knife, which had pierced his heart, was all bloody at his side!

CHAPTER III.

KEALWIN'S LEGATEES.

A DAY or two afterwards Lester Temple drove over to Langbourne in Mr. Bryant's dog-cart. Several times during the course of his journey he was stopped by inquisitive people anxious to know whether any clue had been found to the murderer of Doctor Kealwin : and he answered all questions in the same manner. No clue had been found, and what was more, no clue seemed likely to be found. A stranger had been seen to enter the village of Messingham after night-fall, who called at a public house for some refreshment ; and had not been seen again.

Was he a suspicious looking personage? Upon this matter opinions were divided. Certain personages who prided themselves upon their physiognomical talents were inclined to regard the face of this stranger as the face of a man whose moral perceptions were terribly blunted : others said the poor fellow looked like a harmless vagabond, who would never have pluck enough to commit a murder. In connection with the murder was one curious fact. Nothing had been stolen from the person of the Doctor ; and he had several notes, and a good many sovereigns in his pocket. Moreover, nothing was found missing in the room. The silver cup (which on this occasion had a significance little apprehended by its owner,) was discovered standing on the table, exactly on the same spot where Dr. Kealwin's friends had seen it standing when they bade him good night. Nothing in the room had been touched save the knife, which did the deadly work : and that was found in the morning lying by the side of the murdered man. Whatever might have been the murderer's

motive—plunder was certainly not that motive.

Had the Doctor any enemies? He was not known to have any. Everybody in the place gave him a good word: even the Rector, who looked coldly on Kealwin's religious and irreligious views, was constrained to admit that he was not a bad member of society after all. Looking at the act from every point of view, the murder was as singular as any which of late years has puzzled newspaper readers, and started ingenious conjectures as to its solution.

Answering all enquiries in the best way he could, Lester Temple drove in to Langbourne; and arrived at his destination, the Hall, a little while after mid-day. Having always liked the Doctor,—for Kealwin had behaved with unvarying kindness to him,—Lester felt low spirited as he drove along: and the aspect of Langbourne Hall did not cheer up his spirits as he approached it.

"This place looks deuced miserable," he said, as he jumped from his dog-cart and ascended the steps to the door: but perhaps

in a year or two it may look a little more lively !”

In obedience to his ring, a servant appeared, who opened the door with apparent hesitation. It was so rarely people called, that it was almost a novelty for her to open the door for a visitor. It was a cold day ; and the cold without meeting the volume of cold which circled round the large entrance hall, caused the girl to shudder. In remarking her dismal appearance, Lester Temple remarked too, that she opened the door as quietly as possible, as though there was somebody ill in the house, to whom all noise was painful.

“ Is Mr. Evershed at home ?”

“ Yes, sir. Do you want him ?”

Lester stepped in. “ Is he engaged now ?”

“ No, sir : he’s in that room,” pointing to the one usually occupied by Mrs. Evershed.

“ What name, sir ?” asked the girl, half timidly.

“ Temple. But never mind announcing me. He knows me. There’s nobody with him, I suppose ?”

"Nobody, sir."

With his footsteps echoing drearily, he crossed the wide, dimly-lighted hall, and opened the door of the room to which the servant, who had now left him, flitting away in a ghostly manner, pointed.

As he entered, he saw Robert Evershed, thin in figure and pale of face, sitting at a table, writing, with papers scattered on all sides of him.

"Lester! how glad I am to see you! But what has brought you here?"

"Have you heard nothing?"

"Nothing! Of what?"

"Kealwin is dead, and I have come over to tell you so."

"Kealwin dead! I thought he boasted of a charmed life."

"He might, indeed, have boasted of a charmed life, so far as his health was concerned, but he could not insure it against a murderer's knife." And then Lester told his friend what has already been related in these pages.

When he had finished, Robert said—

"And why have you come all this way to tell me this long story? I should have learned the particulars in the newspaper. To me the Doctor was nothing in life——"

"But in death he is," interrupted Lester. "I know you never regarded him very kindly; but you will regard him differently now, Lester. Mr. Bryant, as one of his executors, of course knew the terms of his will, and to me he communicated them this morning. What are the papers you have there, Bob?" he said, suddenly turning from his subject.

"Letters from lawyers — bills — mortgage-deeds. Fresh disasters have happened to me lately, and I am trying to raise some money to meet them."

"Burn the letters, put the bills aside, and light a pipe with your mortgage-deeds, and for once look cheerful. I know you've had a hard time of it, old boy, but times will brighten now. I see that you can guess what I've got to say. To each of his servants the Doctor leaves a nice comfortable legacy; to each of his executors five hundred pounds a-piece; a thousand to

each of the Bryants ; to me—Lester Temple,—out of regard to the memory of my father, whom he always liked,—property so invested, that I shall have about five hundred a-year from him (fancy the old boy being so kind to me, of whom he knew very little). To several hospitals three hundred a-piece ; and to his cousin, Robert Evershed, Esq., of Langbourne Hall, Essex, the residue of his property, amounting in all to some hundred and fifty thousand pounds.”

“To me ! all this to me !” cried Robert, almost staggering with surprise.

“To you. So give the poor Doctor a kind word at last, and a hope that, Pagan as he was, he hasn’t anything to complain of now.”

Clear-headed as Robert Evershed was, he was confused and bewildered ; he had been so used to trouble ; burthens, removed for a time, had fallen back on him, heavier than ever ; bright prospects had revealed themselves for a few brief moments, to be succeeded by an outlook in life, more dreary than ever, that he was almost unable to realize the truth of the present

happy visitation. Having given a long sigh, he said—

“ So there is a promise of peace at last !”

“ How is your mother, Robert ?” said Lester, after a pause ; “ you must excuse my not having asked you how she was in my eagerness to give you good news.”

“ She is very ill—worse than I have ever seen her ; and she will not be here long. If anything can do her good, by affording her unexpected pleasure, it will be the knowing that the sad doom that hung over the name of Evershed is averted. For the last week or so I have feared that I should never do my work, and she has feared the same. And now my work will be a short and easy one ! I will go and tell her the good news you have brought me.”

Returning in about a quarter of an hour, Robert said—

“ The surprise was almost too great for her in her weak state. She fainted when I told her. I have long felt that she has been sinking, and I am convinced of it now.”

There was a subject which one, in the excitement of speaking, and the other in the excitement of listening, had forgotten: that subject was Sibylla Proby. It was Lester who first spoke of her.

"And now, Bob, I suppose you will go and look after Sibylla?"

"How is she?" asked Robert, quickly.

"You know she is not at Messingham, but at Haystone—my place. Emily Bryant is delicate, and Miss Proby has accompanied her there, because she is always better there than at home."

"Then you of course will see her soon. As you are a sharer in Dr. Kealwin's kindness, you will not remain much longer at the Priory?"

"I dare say I shall see her soon. What shall I tell her?"

"Nothing: leave me to do the telling. I shall come on her one day, and give her a surprise. And so I'm the possessor of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and my work of self-denial and heroism is at an end!"

In the afternoon Lester drove back to Messingham, reflecting upon his own good fortune, and wondering whether it would assist him in winning an object of which he had long been foolishly covetous. Perhaps not until this moment, when his position in the world was really assured, did he recognise the impossibility of ever winning Georgine's love, or, at least, of winning her hand, unless this piece of good luck had happened to him. As tutor in her family, he had dreamed himself into love for her,—a girl who had never attempted to conceal her vanity or ambition. Now that he was removed above the necessity of occupying such a position—all honourable as it is—would Georgine look upon him with the favour which he was wise enough to know now she would not have conceded to him when he was only her brother's tutor?

"At least I'll ascertain one of these days," said he, as he drove into the grounds of the Priory.

The poor Doctor was followed to his grave by Robert Evershed as his chief mourner, but

the funeral was no sooner over than he returned again to Langbourne. Mrs. Evershed was much worse, and her medical adviser said that she might die at any moment: it was certain that her life could not be prolonged for any length of time. Robert Evershed postponed, therefore, the performance of the many business formalities connected with his position as chief legatee of Doctor Kealwin, until his mother's death, expected as fully by her as by himself, should leave his time disengaged. And the same cause which made him postpone the performance of matters of an immediately business nature, made him delay taking any steps with regard to Sibylla.

Mrs. Evershed lingered longer than was expected, but she was strangely softened as her end approached. The dark cloud which had threatened to increase in density but a short while since, was gone, and Robert Evershed would be all, and more than his forefathers had been.

One night as she was taking leave of her son until the morning, she said—

“ You must not forget Sibylla Proby ; I was hard and unkind to her, but I think she loves you, Robert ; and if you love no one better—and I know you do not now—remember that you were once pledged to her as her husband.”

These were the last words she ever spoke to her son, and they were spoken with ineffable kindness. Misfortune had made her stern, and oftentimes unconsciously selfish, but the bright hopes that came hand in hand with death, brought back all her native kindliness of thought and heart, and she spoke as tenderly to Robert this last night of her days on earth, as when, years and years ago, she had confessed that she loved one of the name of Evershed, whose honour had been her greatest pride on earth.

Long before the morning she was dead.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH GEORGINE SAYS "NO."

WHEN the terms of Dr. Kealwin's will got noised about, it was universally admitted that these terms were very just. It was well known that he had but one male relative in the world, whose kinship was not close, and it was feared that this person might not be benefited to any great extent by his will; general, therefore, was the satisfaction, when the news circulated amongst those who knew the Doctor, that to Robert Evershed was left by far the greater portion of the property. His legacies to his servants were generous; his remembrances of

the Bryants spoke eloquently of the regard which he had entertained for them ; and his very handsome legacy to Lester Temple, gave proof conclusive of his cherishing a tender recollection of the early friendship which had subsisted between him and Temple's father. And those who knew Kealwin best, were rather of opinion that his apparent kindness and geniality of nature really veiled such selfishness of feeling, as would have caused him long ago to have forgotten the friendships of his early manhood.

A month had gone by since the Doctor's death, and still Lester Temper remained at the Priory. Mr. Bryant had more difficulty than he expected in obtaining a tutor ; and that he might be put to no trouble, and that Harry's education should not be neglected, Mr. Temple professed himself willing to remain, and to discharge his duties as before. It is, however, presumable that he stopped as much for his own pleasure as for Mr. Bryant's.

All the unamiability with which Georgine Bryant used formerly to treat Mr. Temple had vanished from her conduct. To him she was

perfectly friendly and gracious, but she was no more. Even when he was alone with her, he could not get her to behave with less conventionality than when they were in the society of others. Was this pride?—was this indifference? If Lester could have satisfied himself that it was pride, he would have cared little; but whenever he fancied that it was indifference, he would bite his lips, and call himself a fool for having dreamed himself into love with her.

Once or twice he thought of asking Mrs. Prince how Georgine felt disposed towards him, and then it occurred to him it was quite possible that on this matter Olivia was as ignorant as himself.

One morning Lester was startled by an announcement from Mr. Bryant that he had been successful in engaging a tutor for Harry at last, thanking him at the same time for his kindness in having remained so long in discharge of a voluntary duty. Mr. Bryant was a blind man in the matter of the romance of which Lester Temple was the hero, and his daughter the heroine; he

naturally thought therefore that his quondam tutor would be glad to get away. It was clear to Lester that he could frame no further excuse for remaining ; and that if he spoke to Georgine at all, he must speak to her on an early day.

"Your successor is coming in three days, Mr. Temple ; you are therefore your own master now," said Mr. Bryant with earnest, but, under the circumstances, aggravating politeness.

Lester had no chance of speaking alone to Georgine that day ; for it so happened that Mrs. Calley arrived, and occupied the greater part of the time of the two sisters. There were certain periods of the year unvaryingly devoted to a visit from this old lady. At Easter, at Midsummer, in the shooting season, and on New Year's Day, Mrs. Calley was sure to be staying at the Priory ; and between these periods, she put in an appearance occasionally, giving only a day's notice of her arrival. I have said that one of the periods especially devoted to a visit from her, was the shooting season, and this was the case because she had a perfectly developed taste for game ;

and game at Messingham was very plentiful.

"I can't afford to buy game," she was apt to say, "for it is very dear in London. It is very kind of you to send me a hamper now and then ; but I always like to be at Messingham for a week or two in September ; there you get game to perfection, and plenty of it."

With a view therefore to the enjoyment of her periodical visit, and her annual game, Mrs. Calley appeared at the Priory, just when Lester Temple was about to leave. It happened that her visit was so timed on the present occasion, that she found herself called upon to do more than eat game ; and the attack of biliousness which usually succeeded her visit to Messingham, was less severe, owing to the fact of her mind having been engaged, as well as her liver !

"Well, young man," said Mrs. Calley to Lester Temple, the day after her arrival at the Priory, "and so I hear you have been made well off ; I'm glad to hear it. I always liked you. And now, I dare say that you are in a position to marry, you will marry."

"It's possible I may, Mrs. Calley, if I can find anybody charitable enough to have me."

"Ah! that's a consideration. Charitable enough to have you! Now I shouldn't mind making a bet, if I approved of betting," (which she did not, as the chances are that she might have had as often to pay as to receive), "that you might make an offer to a hundred young ladies, and receive a favourable answer, while the hundred and first—the one you liked best—would say no."

"I dare say," answered Lester, guessing at the matter she was driving at.

"We always want something we can't get," philosophically continued Mrs. Calley. "It's very aggravating, I know, but it is no use complaining. I've wanted lots of things I never had, all my life; but it is some time since I made a fuss because such was the case."

"You've guessed something, Mrs. Calley."

"Guessed what?"

And Lester plumped his secret out.

"And so you've taken a fancy to Georgine

Bryant, have you? I thought as much. Secret and clever as young men are, they can never blind a sharp woman's eyes. You betrayed yourself when I was staying here in the summer, and you betrayed yourself yesterday, and this morning—Georgine Bryant. Now, young man, how do you expect she will receive your offer?"

Lester hesitated.

"I almost fear," he said at last—

"Exactly. Why do you fear?"

"Because of my worldly position. Better as it is, since Doctor Kealwin was kind enough to remember me in his will, it is scarcely that which a Miss Bryant would look for in a husband."

"No, though a husband, with even five hundred a year, independent of what he may obtain by following his profession, is not to be got every day. Now, young man, I've been on the earth a long time, and I've made a good many discoveries. One thing I've discovered is this, that the majority of people are not half so rich as people give them credit for being; that young men, whom mothers, too, with marrying daugh-

ters, look upon with covetous eyes on account of their money, have a good deal less than these interested mothers imagine ; and that young ladies, who pass current for heiresses, are in a similar position. Another thing I have discovered, that poor people are really not so poor as their Christian brethren are in the habit of supposing. ‘ Not so Bad as we seem,’ gives the title to a comedy ; and ‘ Not so Rich as we seem,’ and ‘ Not so Poor as we seem,’ might appropriately give the title to two more. I’ve made a long speech, but it was to afford you encouragement. If you’ve anything in you, I don’t see why you should undervalue the strength of your present position. Surely a good-looking, clever young man like you, can do something in the world.”

“ I should like to do something,” said Lester.

“ And how do you intend to make a figure—to get distinguished ?”

Lester Temple knew very well that Mrs. Calley was one of those prejudiced personages who would regard his own particular tastes and aspirations with great disfavour. He hesitated

therefore before he told her what means he proposed taking for becoming that distinguished figure in the world which the lady thought—and perhaps reasonably enough—that he ought to become.

Getting the better of his hesitation, he said :—

“ I’ve always thought that I had some considerable musical talent, which I might exercise with profit and reputation.”

“ What, become a fiddler ?”

“ No, no, Mrs. Calley. I believe I could, indeed, I know I could compose music !”

Said Mrs. Calley, as it were to herself, in a terribly sarcastic voice :—“ The Cock-a-doodle-do Polka, dedicated to her Grace the Duchess of Shanghai, by her most dutiful servant, Lester Temple.” Then turning towards him—“ Do you think the young lady you’ve been silly enough to take a fancy to, would care to see her husband’s name stuck on the cover of such a piece of music, which perhaps nobody would care to play ?”

“ Really, Mrs. Calley, you put the worst face

on the matter," said Lester with some show of temper.

"Only in order that before you take any definite step, you may think twice, and not go to the girl with a cock and bull story, which may make her despise you. Women are wonderfully funny creatures. They'll put up with what you would fancy would cause them deadly offence; while a slight *gaucherie* will make them your enemies for life. Propose to a woman with your leg broken, your head broken, your arm broken, and with one foot in the grave if you like, the probability is that she'll have you. But propose to her when you've got a cold in your head, and she'll say 'No' in a moment. So many a girl will have a man, if he has nothing, if he's literally a beggar; but let him talk to her about making a fortune, and a reputation by fiddling, and she'll laugh in his face!"

"I am not a fiddler. I don't think of being a fiddler," cried Lester, with desperation.

"Its all the same, young man. Turn lawyer, doctor, parson, barrister, merchant.

Be something that's real; and think no more about your fiddle-stick!"

"Good heavens, Mrs. Calley! How aggravating you are!"

"Well—well, I dare say I am. But you've been wanting me to tell you whether I thought you had any chance of getting Miss Bryant for a wife; and I've been thinking what you should do, and what you should not do. I don't like musical, painting, and writing people; I never did. There's nothing certain about them; they are all weather-cocks; and the majority of young ladies are of my opinion. They like a man whose profession has some recognised standard in society, clever as he may be, as an author, or artist, or composer. And Georgine Bryant is the last girl in the world to fall in love with—with a fiddler! That's the most expressive word I can find."

"At any rate," cried Lester, rising and speaking hastily; "I'll make a venture, and profess to do nothing more than I can."

And Lester Temple said no more; the next person to whom he spoke upon the subject so

near to his heart was Georgine herself. Entering the drawing-room in the afternoon, he found her at the piano. As he appeared, she arose.

"Don't rise," he said, "as I shall not hear you play many more times."

"Surely it cannot give you much pleasure to hear me play, Mr. Temple—so well as you can play yourself!"

"Indeed it does, Miss Bryant." Georgine however did not reseat herself; but stood, against the piano, her hand resting upon it.

She looked very pretty. Lester thought he had never seen her looking prettier—with her light brown hair and her wonderful brown eyes.

"I am going to-morrow," he said.

"Won't you wait and see your friend, Mr. Evershed? Papa expects him in a day or two."

Lester shook his head. "My time is up. My mother is anxious to see me: and, Miss Bryant, you must be getting tired of me!"

"No, no, Mr. Temple, you must not say that!" And idle Georgine spoke with more than usual eagerness and warmth.

"And can I really flatter myself, that my departure will be regretted by you. I once thought that"—he hesitated—"at least to one my departure would have been welcome."

"Indeed — why !" said Georgine, flashing her eyes full into his.

"Do you ask why?"

She stamped her foot. "You men are, sometimes, the victims of most extraordinary misconceptions. I suppose you refer to myself as being the one who would have welcomed your departure, at one time. I hope you don't think so now!"

"I should be very, very sorry to think so, Miss Bryant. I scarcely know anything which would pain me so much."

And then Lester ceased speaking. Georgine made no reply : and her eyes were turned towards the floor.

"Miss Bryant, I am going to-morrow, and I wish to ask you a question before I go. I wish to speak to you upon something very urgent. I—I—love you. I have loved you long. I know that my position is not equal to

yours ; but in spite of the disadvantage on my side, cannot you look upon me with favour ?”

This was no new revelation to Georgine. The tutor’s eyes had told her this story before ; but she had affected not to see it.

Lester Temple went on hurriedly—impetuously, as lovers do, and will do till the end of time. It was the old story, tragedy—comedy—pathos—burlesque—all fantastically commingled. Confessions which should have come last came first,—there were arguments without premises,—premises succeeded by no argument—pleading—deprecation—passion ; words galloped after one another ; and then halted lamely, only to start off again with renewed impetuosity. And Lester Temple’s declaration concluded, as such declarations invariably do, with the appeal *ad misericordiam*.

Georgine did not answer him when he had finished ; for her mind was in confusion.

“ Speak, Georgine ! speak !” he said. “ I love you so much. I know well enough that you may look for one higher than myself for a hus-

band. I know that I shall have in some measure to make my way in the world ; but I can do it, I am sure I can do it. The world is not unkind to those who strive to gain a place in it ; and for your sake, I will strive my best and hardest. Tell me that you love me, and you will give me energy for anything."

Still Georgine was silent. There was a struggle in her heart. Vain, ambitious as she was, it was a pleasure for her, to know that she was loved by Lester Temple ; but her vanity and ambition would not suffer her to answer his question favourably.

"Tell me, Georgine, that you love me," pleaded Lester again. "Nothing that I can do to make me worthy of your love, shall I think too much. Only tell me that you care for me, and I will wait with patience for the day when I can make you my wife, worthily."

The more Lester Temple pleaded, the more furiously the battle raged in Georgine's heart. He was not so blind but that he could see the struggle there ; and with unutterable pain he saw that the victory was not inclining to

his side. Vanity was doing more than getting a triumph over honest, womanly love : it was trampling that love in the dust.

“ You,—you have forgotten yourself, Mr. Temple,” said Georgine, at last.

Lester Temple’s first impulse was to be angry at these words, but it died as soon as it was born.

“ Georgine,” he cried painfully—his eyes bent pleadingly towards hers. How strangely hers looked into his : the troublous drama of which her heart was the scene, being accurately imaged there. In fitful flashes the woman’s love for the man spoke ; and in fitful flashes the lady’s vanity contemned the arrogance of the tutor !

“ Georgine,” he said, “ do not despise me, for I will strive my best that you do not regret having loved me. But I am not poor, thanks to the kindness of Dr. Kealwin. And I am not vain when I say I have abilities, and I will use them in your service. Can I say more—but again, and again that I love you with all my heart and soul ! Speak—answer me !”

Georgine was a little touched, but she shewed no signs of answering him favourably.

"I am very sorry Mr. Temple, but I should neither be consulting your happiness nor my own by accepting the offer you have made me!"

"You do not mean that, Georgine!"

Her silence answered him.

Giving a deep sigh, he said:—"Well, I have only been deceived. I thought you might have loved me. I would have striven very hard to make you happy!"

In another minute he had gone. Georgine sat down and thought. She bit her lips, and murmured in a tone, which she tried to make truthful:—

"I do not love him. No; I do not!"

Again, and again she said:—

"I do not love him. I do not love him!"

And with these words, and her vanity applauding the course she had taken, she consoled herself.

On the morrow, Lester Temple went away.

CHAPTER V.

WHEREIN THE THEME IS LIKE THAT OF THE
LAST.

ROBERT EVERSLED was expected very shortly at the Priory; and his arrival was anticipated by no one more eagerly than by Mrs. Calley.

The project she had of bringing Olivia and Robert together might be again resumed. Fortune had suddenly smiled upon Mr. Evershed, and if his wealth was not equal to that of Mr. Somerton, it was at least ample. Even as a poor man, Mrs. Calley had admitted to herself that he was preferable to Arthur. How much more so was he now that he was rich. As to his having been previously engaged, of

which Mrs. Calley had heard something, she thought this a very little matter, so long as she could dissever Olivia from Mr. Somerton, or ascertain that Olivia had not gone to such lengths with him, as not to allow her to draw back with credit to herself.

To Mrs. Calley's great delight, no Mr. Somerton had appeared since she had been at Messingham; and, curious enough, she had put no question to Olivia as to how matters at present stood between her and that gentleman; contenting herself with gathering what information she could from Georgine. What Georgine told her pointed to the fact of her sister having treated him rather coldly of late. It is unnecessary to say that this announcement carried comfort to Mrs. Calley's heart. At last there came an opportune moment, when the old lady could question Olivia herself.

"Mr. Somerton hasn't been here lately," said she, by way of beginning the matter.

"No, Mrs. Calley, he has not. Like other gentlemen, he has most likely been engaged shooting."

"Very probably. If you cared for him, Olivia, I should think you'd wish his gun farther."

"Perhaps."

"You don't care for him, I see."

"Did I ever say I did?"

"Then why play with him?"

Olivia shrugged her shoulders, as if the playing with him were a very little matter.

"Do you, or do you not, intend to marry him?" asked Mrs. Calley, after a moment or two's pause.

"You would be very glad to hear me say no—would you not?"

"Indeed I should. You've played with him long enough now. Do so no longer. Tell him that you find you cannot regard him with the love of a wife—in short, set him going. He's shallow-pated, and you can't do him a great deal of mischief. Then when he's gone, take up with Robert Evershed. Such a husband as he would be is worth the having."

"So that's the programme, my dear Mrs. Calley, is it? But suppose that I don't care any more for Robert Evershed than I do for Arthur Somerton?"

“But you must! One is a fool, and the other is—in short, the other has something in him.”

“I ought to be very grateful to you, Mrs. Calley, for your interest in my welfare. When I do select a husband—if I ever marry again—I hope sincerely that he’ll meet with your favour!”

“But you will marry again. You will marry Robert Evershed. I heard something about his loving somebody else. But that may be all moonshine.”

“I believe, Mrs. Calley,” said Olivia, “that he was engaged to Emily’s governess—at least, that he was attached to her.”

“Bah! Emily’s governess isn’t here, and won’t be here for some weeks, I suppose. You’ll surely have time enough to arrange matters with Mr. Evershed before she comes.”

Olivia only laughed.

“You rate my powers of fascination very high,” she said at last.

“Not higher than they are, Mrs. Prince. There! There’s Arthur Somerton now. Look!”

Indeed there was—advancing towards the house on that steed of his, which had brought him only too slowly, times out of number, to his loved one's presence.

“I'll go, Olivia,” cried Mrs. Calley, starting up. “I'll go. Have the matter out with him. Give him a final answer. Don't let him come dangling after you any more. Then you'll have the ground clear.”

And with these words the old lady darted out of the drawing-room into the conservatory. Here she took her station, out of sight of the glass door opening into it, but near enough to hear what passed between Olivia Prince and Mr. Somerton.

To be in perpetual uncertainty as to the reality of the regard of the lady for whom you have conceived a passion ; to receive a smile from her one day, to receive no smile the next, and perhaps a frown on the following, and then again a smile, cannot, I fancy, constitute a happy or enviable state of mind. Allowances are always to be made for variations of temper in her whom you have the honour to adore, but when her

temper is always unsatisfactory, you cannot smile upon the world, I suppose. Now of late, Olivia Prince had not behaved to Arthur Somerton as he desired. It was not that she was unamiable, for Mrs. Prince could not be unamiable. She was only charmingly indifferent to his attentions ; and when he again and again pressed her to say whether she would be his wife, she laughed the matter off, and started some other subject ; conducting herself towards him in just such a way as to make him profoundly miserable. Of such treatment Mr. Somerton had had enough, and he had come to tell Mrs. Prince so to-day. Generally he was very deferential and patient. On this occasion he came determined to hold his own, and to show the capricious lady that he had more in him than she gave him credit for.

“ Well, Mr. Somerton,” said Olivia, graciously ; “ here you are again, after having played the truant !”

So spoken to, Arthur found a little of his courage going.

“ Yes, I suppose I have been playing the truant. But why Mr. Somerton, and not Arthur ?”

"Arthur, if you like," said Olivia, carelessly.

It mattered little to her what he called her.

"I see," he replied, "how matters stand. You don't care for me, Olivia. Well, if you don't, tell me so at once."

"You wouldn't wish me to be so rude?"

"I'd rather have you rude than untrue," answered Mr. Somerton, angrily.

"Untrue," echoed Olivia, slowly. "Untrue?"

Then she was silent—provokingly silent—waiting for Arthur's next words.

"I want to know, Mrs. Prince," he said, "whether I am to go on playing the miserable game I have been playing for some months past. I wish for a definite answer. I have told you again and again that I love you. I have begged you to be my wife; and now, once for all, I want to know whether you will."

"Plain spoken that question, without any varnish of sentiment!" was Mrs. Prince's comment.

Arthur Somerton gave a savage pull at his watch-chain.

“ Will you, or will you not, be my wife ? ”
he said again.

“ What a unique way of asking a question, upon which such weighty issues hang ! Its freedom from circumlocution is refreshing ! ”

“ You are laughing at me now—you are fooling me now ! I have asked you a plain question, and I want a plain answer. Will you be my wife ? ”

“ Emphatically—no ! ”

Certainly, though he asked for a direct reply, Mr. Somerton was surprised at the one he received, whose directness was unmistakable. She would beat about the bush—she would delay, or play with the question. The answer which sent his hopes to the winds upset all his courage and dignity ; and, mingling with his anger, was a whining tone of complaint, as that of a child, when she has not got the doll that she was promised.

“ You’ve behaved shamefully to me—you have ! I didn’t expect this ! You have broken your word. What did your letter say—the

letter you wrote in answer to mine, asking you to become my wife?"

"Nothing, except that before I could give an answer to so important a question, I must become more intimately acquainted with you. I have become more intimately acquainted with you, Mr. Somerton, since then; and such acquaintance has shown me that I can never be happy as your wife!"

Poor Arthur was wonderfully taken back. There stood the handsome, queenly woman, almost smiling as she spoke these fatal words; and there stood he, his height falling short of hers, feebly looking at her; angry with himself, and yet feeling that despite had been done to his dignity,—angry with her, and yet loving her still.

Again the words bubbled to his lips—

"You've behaved shamefully to me—you have."

"Don't be silly, Mr. Somerton! I've done nothing of the kind, as you will have the wisdom to see, when your passion has a little abated."

"But why have encouraged me—why have given me hopes?"

"Remember, Mr. Somerton, that you were willing to wait until a further acquaintance had opened my eyes to the real state of my feelings with regard to you. Had you liked, you could have broken off all negotiations then. I should not have murmured. You were unwilling to do so. Do not, therefore, attribute blame to me, because a course, especially favoured by you, has not resulted in what you wished."

"That's all very well for you to say this, Olivia; but I never thought you would have treated me in this fashion."

Then, after a pause—

"You quite mean what you say, Mrs. Prince? You wish to sever our engagement?"

"I cannot sever what has never existed."

What could Mr. Somerton do? Should he break out into fresh accusations against her? Should he make an appeal to her pity? Should he ask her to reflect and wait awhile before giving him a final answer? At length, after much

troublesome inward debating, he asked her this last question :

With all her old amiability she replied to it.

"I am sorry to say that I cannot grant your request, Mr. Somerton. It was your desire that I should give you a final answer to-day, and I have given you that final answer. You have accused me of treating you with unkindness. Such a charge would be justifiable, were I to consent to any further delay, and then give you only the same reply that I have given you to-day ; and I am sure I should."

"Then there is nothing now for me to do here," cried Arthur ; "and I'll go. I only hope you'll never have to repent of having treated me as you have."

I am sorry to say that this last assertion of Mr. Somerton was not strictly veracious.

"Capital ! capital !" said Mrs. Calley, appearing as soon as Arthur was out of the room. "Capital ! You've treated him well—just as he deserved." (May I parenthetically suggest that Mrs. Calley's moral perceptions were somewhat blunted in the matter ?) "He won't trouble

you any more, Olivia. Pray don't take it to heart that you have sent him to the right about!"

It did not seem that Mrs. Prince was taking anything to heart, as, having nodded to her friend, she sat down at the piano, and, after a little premeditation, began playing an air which was certainly less sorrowful than gay.

On the appointed day Robert Evershed appeared at the Priory. As the most important legatee under Dr. Kealwin's will, there was a good deal of business for him to do in connexion with the executors, trustees, &c.; but with the particulars of this business it is not necessary that this history should trouble itself. The first two or three mornings of his visit he spent with Mr. Bryant in this gentleman's study, reading various legal documents, and signing various legal papers. His duty in this respect over, he was free to enjoy the society of the ladies of the Priory, who, it is superfluous to say, made themselves especially agreeable to him. A

young, good-looking man, with some considerable amount of intelligence, and with a certain romantic air hanging about him, as one who had suddenly found a hard career transformed, as by a magic wand, into one delightfully bright and unfatiguing, was not likely to have his time hanging heavily on his hands whilst he was in the company of two ladies, whose personal qualifications were none of the most contemptible. Some time ago, when Olivia Prince first saw him, she had found his society very agreeable, and had tried to make her own as agreeable to him. Then, he was known only as Dr. Kealwin's poor relation ; now, he was the possessor of the greatest portion of that gentleman's property. All Mrs. Calley's best abilities were devoted to bringing these two people together. Alone with Olivia, she dwelt upon the excellent qualifications of Robert. With others, Mrs. Calley would say or do something, the effect of which was to make Mr. Evershed a personage of importance amongst them, well knowing that every woman looks with eyes of admiration upon that man who is greater by intellectual

distinction, by personal influence, or by physical powers, than the crowd around him.

I don't think that Robert Evershed was vainer than the majority of men. Is he therefore to be condemned because such incense as he received was personally agreeable to him? But a while ago, and the world was dark; his own prospects grew more cheerless day by day; his spirit to face the inevitable toil of his purpose was flickering, faint, and low. All this was changed. What is the wonder, then, that from being merely stimulated by happy influences, he became intoxicated by them? His life at the Priory was very agreeable—business and pleasure alternating; a morning spent over vellum, an afternoon spent with two well-bred, handsome gentlewomen, who played music, or croquet, or billiards, just as the humour of Mr. Evershed might suit. Sometimes he was awakened from his dream of happiness by a chance reflection that he had not yet written to Sibylla Proby, as he fully intended to do. With due allowance for his purpose of giving her an agreeable surprise, by saying

that he was a rich man, and that he could marry her at any moment, it must be said that business—business arising out of his mother's death, and out of his newly acquired power to pay all the debts which hung heavily on the estate of Langbourne Hall—had had no little hand in causing a delay in his happy communication to Sibylla Proby. What business had once done, pleasure was doing now.

Either by accident or design, Mrs. Calley so contrived, that Robert Evershed and Olivia Prince should be together as much as possible. Mr. Somerton was removed, and so no danger from him was to be apprehended. Mrs. Calley dropped no hints to Robert as to her hopes. She believed that these would be best satisfied by giving him no information respecting them. If young men suspect that traps are being laid by disinterested persons for catching their affections, they don't like to be told outright that such is the case. To Mrs. Calley's great satisfaction, she saw that her plot was thriving. She watched Robert and Olivia about, murmuring to herself, during the observation—

"It will be all right. She'll have him, or my name isn't Calley."

Again and again Robert blamed himself for not having written to Sibylla. He remembered his mother's last words to him, and he was not indifferent to their meaning.

"I will write to-day," he said, when his conscience had been doing a little duty. Alas! that conscience had to struggle hard with some fragrant perfume which hung about him—caught from Olivia Prince's handkerchief, or dress.

There happened to be some writing-paper near at the time, and he had just drawn this towards him, when Olivia appeared with Mrs. Calley.

"I and Georgine are going for a ride, Mr. Evershed. Can we depend upon you to be our escort?"

"May I write this letter first?"

"Is it an important one?"

"It is a letter that I may write to-morrow as well as to-day," said Robert, after a pause.

"Then write it to-morrow. Do! For we think of going a long ride; and, unless we go now, we shall not be home in time for dinner."

Still Robert hesitated ; and his hand wandered to a pen. Once more Olivia's voice was heard, pleasantly urging him to be their escort.

"Then I suppose I must postpone my letter-writing," said Robert, musingly.

And, as he and Olivia left the room, conscience having lost the battle against that perfume which floated around him like incense, Mrs. Calley looked after them, smiling grimly :—

"You've got him, Olivia ! you've got him ! How often these strong men yield, where weaker ones would be firm !"

CHAPTER VI.

ROBERT LISTENS TO THE SIREN.

ROBERT EVERSLED did not write the letter to Sibylla Proby on the day following that on which his intention was interrupted by Mrs. Prince, and in consequence postponed. Nor did he write it on the next, the next, or the next. In short he did not write it at all; forgetting to do it sometimes, and excusing himself from doing it at others. Day succeeded day at Messingham Priory, and he found every one was so pleasantly spent in Olivia Prince's society, that he felt ill-disposed to interrupt pleasure by duty. It was not that he had for-

gotten Sibylla, or that he had become indifferent to her. You will say that he was very weak, — perhaps that he was very wicked. It is not for me to defend him. I have only to speak the truth. You may say even that he was inconsistent; that a man whose boast of firmness was no vain one, who had laid out for execution a hard purpose in life, and had not swerved from it, would not be weak enough to bask in the smiles of one woman, when his hand was in a measure pledged to another, whom he had really loved, and from whom he had separated with pain. My answer is that no man is consistent, that everybody is, at seasons most unexpected, starting off on courses which, from his known character, no one could have predicated. If Robert was one moment sensible of his folly, and upbraided himself for it, the next moment he was its slave again. Had he any serious purpose? If he had been asked this question during the earlier days of his stay at Messingham he would unflinchingly have said, that he had none whatever; that he admired Mrs. Prince indeed, but that his

admiration had no definite issue. Many of the greatest purposes of our life grow insensibly. Steadily, unmistakably making progress in us, we are unconscious of their progress; their developed reality, though of no hurried consummation, seizes upon our conviction at once, and compels us to see, that all along we have been so acting that such a result as stares us in the face was from the first inevitable.

When a man is rather disposed to fall in love with any lady whose beauty has touched his fancy or his heart, it often happens that there are a thousand and one obstacles to his desires being satisfactorily realized. If the lady's inclinations happen to meet his, the chances are that he is thwarted by family considerations. Either his friends regard her with indifference; or her friends think he is unworthy of her. Money (as the world of young men, with limited incomes, and warm hearts, well knows) is a very serious item in the matter of marriage: and in these days an item of much heavier consideration than birth; for thanks, to many influences, that bugbear birth, or the want of it,

is a less formidable enemy to matrimony than the want of money. The wonderful genealogical tree no longer hangs up in our halls, to strike awe to the beholder; the golden calf is set up there for worship instead.

The objections, however, to Mr. Robert Evershed's course of love, if his behaviour towards Mrs. Prince indicated the fact of his desiring to follow such a course in company with her, were few indeed. It was very evident that she was not indifferent to him. It was also evident that Mr. Bryant could look with no disfavour upon such a son-in-law as Robert Evershed. What son-in-law would be regarded with disfavour, who was very rich, whose intellectual capabilities were above the average, and who in short had a thousand enviable qualities? Robert's connexions were few, and he had no relations, whose opinion in the matter of marriage he need at all consult. That Mr. Somerton had been desirous of Mrs. Prince's hand, he knew very well, and that she had flirted with him, in a manner which was not quite justifiable, he knew too. But why should

the fact of her flirtations, if they were nothing more, prevent Robert's falling in love with her if he wished? In such a fashion Mr. Evershed used sometimes to muse: not however, for a moment intending to do what he argued in favour of. No,—he admired Mrs. Prince; he would enjoy as much of her society as he could: but he would do nothing farther. Who has not thought that he could dally with temptation, and turn aside from it just when he chose? Who has ever dallied with it without yielding? I cannot suppose that Robert Evershed was ignorant of an experience which must be patent to all. At any rate he acted as if he were ignorant: sunning himself in the light of Olivia Prince's presence, but yet holding the intention of removing himself, when he had only enjoyed it a little longer.

Mrs. Calley did her best to bring these two people together: and she did her best in more senses than one. That they should ultimately be brought together by the bonds of matrimony she was very solicitous; and equally solicitous that they should enjoy each other's society, un-

disturbed by the presence of a third as frequently as possible. Magical is the effect of a *tête-à-tête* she knew. If Mrs. Calley had not entertained her present hope, what would she not have done to make things unpleasant between Olivia and Robert Evershed ! with what skill would she not have kept them apart ! what devices would she not have spread to prevent the interchange of half-a-dozen words ! what means would she not have taken in secret to make Olivia despise him ! There was not a quality, a feature, a habit of his, which she would not have held out to ridicule : and when a woman's favour towards a man is a mere superficial attachment, the fact of seeing him placed in any absurd light is sure to have the effect of weakening the attachment. It is only deep love which can withstand the shafts of ridicule. As it was, Mrs. Calley placed every quality of Robert's in the best light. If every influence had set against Evershed's regard for Olivia but that possessed by Mrs. Calley, this influence would have carried the day in his favour.

At last the business which had brought him especially to Messingham was over. The late Doctor Kealwin's affairs were settled. Their settlement, unlike that which so often attends the winding up of a dead man's affairs, was a comparatively easy matter. Wealthy as he was, he never allowed his wealth to encumber him. He knew to a penny where his money was placed. And although he had postponed the making of his will until his last day on earth, all his papers were found in such admirable order, that executors and lawyers had no trouble in performing their duties. Mr. Hamperton had paid a few flying visits to Messingham, but at his own request the greater part of the business was transferred to the hands of another solicitor. Mr. Hamperton's time was occupied by affairs of more transcendent importance than that of winding up a rich deceased country gentleman's business. But all was now settled. Robert Evershed had paid off all the mortgages upon the Langbourne Hall estate: he was in comfortable possession of the greater portion of the late Doctor's property. He was a free man.

"I think all our business is nearly over, Mr. Evershed," said Mr. Bryant to Robert one morning, as they finished a few hours' work in the former gentleman's study: "but I trust you won't leave us yet. I only hope you will make this place your home as long as you find it a comfortable one."

If Robert's desire had been to enjoy a longer intimacy with Mrs. Prince, in order that he might the better know whether he would like her as a wife, the words spoken by Mr. Bryant would have been very glorious to hear. But if he forgot again and again to write to Sibylla Proby, he did not forget her existence, or forget what had passed between them. Dallying with temptation, however, the usual result followed. He could not tear himself away from it. To be with Olivia Prince—to listen to Olivia Prince, was an exquisite pleasure to him. The relief from burdensome work,—the cessation of strain upon his physical and mental powers, —the assurance of future ease and wealthy independency were so great and sudden, that the disturbance of his normal habit of

thought was inevitable. Who wonders at the vagaries of a man who has been suddenly released from prison? Who wonders that a nation which suddenly finds itself free from the yoke imposed by a puritanically moral despot plunges headlong into extravagances upon which even an ordinarily reckless man cries shame?

And Olivia?

She liked him. Perhaps as much as she could like any one now. He was infinitely preferable to Mr. Somerton. He never bored her as the last-named gentleman did; and if he stirred no very deep emotion in her heart, she felt that if he asked her to become his wife, she could do so with a fair prospect of contentment. Most amiable, most fascinating of women, to Robert Evershed especially so, she made no pretence of considering her regard for him, or his regard for her, as priceless things that constituted her life and happiness. I do not believe that Robert entertained any belief that she cared for him very much, but for all this he was not the less attracted by her.

She was the candle, and he was the moth ; an experienced moth, who had seen a good many of his fellows attracted to the flame and burnt up thereby, a foolishly wilful moth too, who was minded to get his wings singed as well.

It was not seldom that he heard the name of Miss Proby mentioned in the Bryant household. As governess to Emily she had occasion to write to the Priory very frequently ; and it was with many a twinge of conscience that his eye fell upon a handwriting with which he was familiar. Was it known in this house that she had been engaged to him ? The circumstances under which they parted, were they known ? Such questions Robert asked himself more than once, and he obtained a favourable answer by reflecting that Sibylla Proby had not long resided there before she left with her charge, and that she was furthermore one of those women who would be the last to make any reference to an inward and painful history. Thinking of the circumstances of his past engagement to Sibylla, he came to a question which he did not ask himself with any great ease, but which he never-

theless felt compelled to ask,—was there any necessity for him to renew this engagement? The first words of separation—had they not been spoken by Sibylla? Was it therefore incumbent on him to speak the words which should reunite them? He put to himself these questions, and then he called himself hard names for doing so. No; the fascination of the siren was not all-powerful over him yet: he had not entirely forgotten his duty. Troubling himself with many questions, he at last wondered whether Sibylla had yet heard of his good fortune; and after reflecting upon the matter, he could only come to the conclusion that she must have done so. In the communications which passed from Messingham to Haystone, it was unlikely that there should be no reference to him; and even should there have been none, Lester Temple, in despite of what Robert had said to him, when he first heard of his good fortune, of keeping the matter secret from Miss Proby, would most likely before this have made her acquainted with the fact. When Robert had fully thought the matter over—this was on

the day when his business at Messingham was virtually at an end—he resolved that he would put himself into communication with Sibylla, and if she still loved him, offer to make her his wife.

This resolve, however, had no effect upon his conduct with Olivia. Like the man who, determined to give up alcohol, or opium, drugs himself heavily with it for one last time, so Robert would drug himself well with Olivia Prince's intoxicating influence, before he eschewed it for ever.

To make him adhere the more strictly to the path of honour were his mother's last words. She who had been cold to Sibylla, when she feared that her union with her son could only result in trouble, and hinder the performance of that work, which in her eyes seemed wonderfully desirable, no sooner knew that all fears for Robert's welfare were foolish, than she thought tenderly of the girl, whom she had helped to part from him; and knowing that she loved Robert, besought him to renew the broken pledge. Again and again the words spoken by his mother recurred to him;—stirring his

faltering resolution, but not speaking with effect enough to cause him to leave the side of her, for whom he was forgetting his duty.

The last day of Mrs. Calley's visit to the Priory came, and Georgine and Mrs. Calley purposed having a few words with Robert. She had duly enquired of Olivia every night whether the gentleman had spoken with any significance, and had been answered that he had not. With the double object of enjoying as much game as she could, and of bringing matters to an issue between her two favourites, she had made a longer visit than usual ; and she was resolved that this visit should not finish until she had openly spoken to Robert Evershed.

She and Robert were walking down the lawn to the river, up which he was going to row Mrs. Prince, now taking a farewell of Georgine at the door, who was leaving for Haystone.

" My visit, like yours, Mr. Calley, is nearly at an end," said Robert.

" Yes : and you've made the best of it !"

Robert blushed a little : the old lady's meaning was unmistakable.

"You've made the best of it. She likes you—I know she likes you! If I were you I should never leave without hearing so from her own lips?"

With something like fear, which was not unassociated with a feeling of some pleasure, Robert thought—Has it come to this? My attentions to her, have they been construed into a meaning I never intended them to have? If so, a very evil spirit whispered in his ear,—there was every excuse for not renewing his pledge to Sibylla.

"I like to see young men act with spirit," said Mrs. Calley admiringly. "If they admire a girl, I like them to show it, as you've done. Well, I approve of your choice. Olivia Prince is a glorious woman!"

"But—but," said Robert: it was duty trying to speak now; its efforts, alas! were ineffectual. "But——"

"Don't go disparaging yourself—don't go and fancy you are not good enough for Mrs. Prince; speak up boldly." Did Mrs. Calley know what was passing through Robert's mind?

The struggle which had been going on there—had she not seen it? and fearing that its issue might clash with her desires, had she not taken upon herself to talk with him now, and place his conduct towards Olivia in such a light, that there was only one thing that he could do? Sarah Calley's length and sharpness of vision were wonderful: and she had heard the name of Sibylla Proby.

"Speak out boldly," repeated Mrs. Calley. "Olivia will never refuse you, and you'll never repent having asked her to become your wife. You do like her, don't you?" And she turned round sharply on Robert. There was a struggle in his heart—short but vehement. The paths of right and wrong, were drawn to a point here. Had he not the courage to tell Mrs. Calley the whole truth, or was he glad that a question was put to him, which, upon being answered, would determine his course for ever?

"You do like her, don't you?" was Mrs. Calley's question one moment: the next came his answer—a quick one; though a good many

thoughts had flashed through his mind before he gave it :—

“ I certainly like her, Mrs. Calley !”

“ Then ask her to be your wife !”

He had hardly time to regret the answer he had given, before Mrs. Prince joined them smiling.

“ I fear I have kept you waiting, Mr. Evershed,” she said ; “ but I have been a long while taking my farewell of Georgine, who’s off to Haystone for a month !”

Georgine was going to the house which contained Sibylla Proby. That she had carried her no message from Mr. Evershed ; that she would probably speak of him in Sibylla’s presence, in such a manner as to show that, if she knew anything of their past relationship, she regarded it as a matter of no significance now ;—Robert thought of all this in a curiously speculative mood. After the first spasm of unpleasantness engendered by this reflection was over, he felt, with some amount of relief, that such a circumstance would give a warrant to his drifting with the stream, to that point, upon which Mrs. Calley’s desires were so eagerly fixed. Yielding

with half reluctance to what he knew was wrong, he comforted himself by every accidental suggestion that occurred to his unquiet mind.

In a few minutes he and Olivia were sitting in the boat. As she walked away from the side of the river, Mrs. Calley said, with a smile ;—" Don't take too long a voyage, for you know I go to-day, and I hope to see you again before I start."

Merrily the boat made its way up the river. The afternoon was a warm mellow one in autumn,—the pleasantest of afternoons, in the whole varying pleasant course of the year. When the boat had left the precincts of the garden, it made its way between green meadows, and fields sloping away on either side of it : anon a group of trees waved their branches airily over the heads of the two in the boat, as it shot under them : anon a mass of rushes enclosed them in, on both sides, so there was nothing but themselves, the sky, and the reeds to see : then it was clear again,—the glorious sunshine making the water sparkle about the oars, and awakening in both the occupants the merriest

spirits. What anchorite would not forget himself and his saintliness in a flirtation, whilst rowing a pretty woman up a pretty river? Robert almost ceased to remember that he had a duty to perform. If he could only go on rowing for ever, with Olivia for his companion! But when arms ache, even romance and sentiment cannot long hold out.

In their return home, Mrs. Prince said: "Let me row a little while. I assure you I have some considerable skill!"

With this, she let go the tiller rope, and arose to take the oars from Robert. As he gave them to her, his hand came in contact with hers,—and forgetting duty, Sibylla Proby, and himself, he allowed his hand to hold hers in a long clasp. Olivia laughed and said:—

"Remember we are drifting with the stream, and we may run against the bank!"

She had hardly so spoken before the prophecy was realized. She staggered, and would have fallen, but for Robert, who, dropping the oars still kept one of her hands in his, and threw his disengaged arm around her. Surely the

devil was in the boat to assist his oblivion of duty.

"Olivia," he said breathlessly. This was the first time he had called her by this name.

"Olivia—"

Olivia, though trying to right herself as quickly as she could, laughing all the while, was still at Robert's mercy; and before she had got up, he had kissed her.

"I won't go in the boat with you any more, Mr. Evershed," said Mrs. Prince, who had re-seated herself.

"Not if I promise to row you all the way from Messingham to Langbourne?" said Robert, significantly. He had spoken under an irresistible impulse; and there was no looking back now.

So it had come to this. Olivia blushed and held her head down. Almost before they were aware of it, the boat was in the garden of the Priory: and Mrs. Calley, dressed for taking her departure, was standing on the bank, awaiting them.

Fixing her quick eyes on Mrs. Prince, she saw that the row had not been without its inci-

dent. Worldly woman as she was, Olivia was not unmoved, and she walked on rather quickly to the house.

“Well,” said Mrs. Calley to Robert—
“Well.” This was said interrogatively.

“You must not ask me: you must ask Mrs. Prince,” was his response.

When she left Messingham that afternoon, she smiled and laughed, much more than she was wont to do, and kissed Olivia Prince again and again, with unusual fervour.

“You are a good girl, my dear; I’m proud of you,” she said as she stepped into the carriage and was driven away.

CHAPTER · VII.

WE RETURN TO SOME OLD FRIENDS.

LESTER TEMPLE is at home once more. With what delight his mother welcomed him ; with what strange pleasure Blanche Legh saw him once again, can well be guessed. Seeing that he has met with some good fortune in an unexpected independency, it might be thought that he would be the Lester of old,—easy of temper, hopeful, and with a sunny smile for all. He is not. A change has come over him ; not a great one, though it is visible to everyone. He is more restless than he used to be. He sits at the piano for a few minutes, strumming vaguely

on the keys ; then he starts up, turns over the music, and reseats himself. He brings out his manuscript score, tries pieces that seem to catch his fancy, and then turns in disgust away. Some days he takes long walks ; on others, he scarcely leaves the house, but lies on the sofa all day, reading novels, or the newspapers, or perhaps doing nothing. What can ail her son ? Mrs. Temple wonders. Reason after reason occurs to her ; and then she at last dimly fancies that she has hit upon the right one.

Blanche sees the altered conduct of Lester too, and grieves. How she had expected him home ! What pictures she had painted in her imagination of what he would be when he was at Haystone once more. How sad her heart is to see that he seems to care so little for his home, and that none of the bright scenes which she had pictured are realised.

“ Mother, I must do something,” said Lester, when he had been home some little time.

“ What do you think of doing ?”

“ I fancy I have lost all my ambition.”

“ I am sorry to hear you say that.”

"I am not what I used to be, mother, and yet I seem to wish to be doing something."

"Not what you used to be, Lester! What nonsense! you imagine this."

Lester shook his head dolefully.

"I've been strumming at the piano, but I haven't my old inspiration. My fingers hang fire, as it were, and I haven't an idea in my head."

"You have been giving way to restlessness: why should you do so? The world is an easy one to you again. You have a nice independency, everything to enable you to sit down comfortably, and to make yourself useful in the best way you can."

"Useful, mother! I never shall be useful; I wish I could be. I wish——"

"This fit of restlessness will pass away, depend upon it, Lester."

"I hope so—it isn't at all comfortable. Do you know, mother—I think I shall go to London."

"Go to London! Directly?"

"Soon. I'll take some of my pieces to

a music publisher and get his opinion on them. If it is favourable, I shall set to work in earnest."

"Lester, while this restless fit is on you, you will never do anything. Now be honest, and confess. You have met with some disappointment, which the good fortune Dr. Kealwin has given you doesn't quite compensate for."

Lester looked guilty.

"Confess, Lester. You are restless because you have failed to succeed in some hope. Tell me what that hope was."

And then Lester told her of Georgine Bryant.

"I wonder you should have cared for a girl like that," said Mrs. Temple, when her son had concluded his story; "vain, idle, ambitious. You might have known that she would have refused you. And it is a good thing she did."

"Mother!"

"I repeat it, Lester, dear. You would never have been happy with her—never; and you will live to thank her that she was unwilling to become your wife."

"I don't think so. However, the matter is over. I dare say I shall not meet her again."

"I should like to see you married, Lester," said Mrs. Temple, after a pause.

"You would?"

"Indeed I should. To one who honoured you and loved you. To one who would be a noble wife."

"And where is this paragon to be found?"

"She may be nearer to you than you guess."

"Well, let us run over the families in the neighbourhood, and hunt amongst them for a lady combining the necessary qualities. First of all, there's the parson's family; three grown up daughters, all of them nearer six feet than five; all of them pious and healthy—hem—no! I respect them, but I don't care, I'm sorry to say, for one of them. Now who comes next? Mrs. Bayley's two doves, gushing, mellifluous, and with freckled skin. Let me think—do I care for them?—I fancy not. Pass Augusta and Elizabeth Bayley. Walk up Gertrude, Susan, and Cecilia Monkton. Fasci-

nating all, but slightly given to scandal. Pass you three, and I really don't know anybody else, mother."

"You forget the Grahams," laughed Mrs. Temple.

"The Grahams! What man would have the courage to aspire to the hand of Miss Graham?—Lilian, I think her name is, with that tremendously aristocratic nose, saying, as plainly as speech, 'Came over with William the Conqueror; went to the Holy Land; fought at Bosworth; can trace my descent back through thirty generations.' No, mother, I can't stand that nose; its aristocratic birth is too much for me. But talking of the Grahams puts me in mind of something. It seems curious that Miss Proby should still remain there with Emily Bryant, now that Robert Evershed is rich."

"It does seem rather curious. They were engaged, weren't they?"

"Yes—at least I think so. But Robert never said much to me on the subject. He used to say that he should never marry. And

when he altered his mind, he gave me but little information as to his reasons for altering."

"Miss Proby is a handsome girl."

"Very. Does Blanche know much of her?"

"No. The Grahams are very mighty people, and don't hold us in high esteem."

"And now we'll return to our subject, mother. I've gone over the list of eligible young ladies in the neighbourhood known to myself. As, however, my acquaintance with England has been rather limited of late years, it is quite possible that I have omitted some which may be approved of by you."

Speaking with intention, Mrs. Temple said—

"And can you not think of any young lady living in Haystone whom you would like to marry? A prettier girl than any one you have named, and a better one; youthful, kind, pure, a little gem of the first water?"

"Mother!"

"Can't you guess, Lester? I meant Blanche Legh."

"Blanche! Petite! She—why! the dear little thing regards me as a brother."

"You are mistaken, Lester—very much," said Mrs. Temple, slowly. "She loves you as I should wish my son to be loved by his wife!"

"You are sure of this, mother?"

"I am, Lester. I have known it long. If I were a man, I would give untold gold for the possession of a wife like Petite. She has lived with me since she was a child, and I know what she is. Can you not love her? or, rather, do you not love her?"

"Indeed, I may say that I do—that I always have. But living as she has done with you and my father, is it wonderful that my love has been rather that of a brother's than of a lover's?"

"No. And, Lester, let me tell you, that some of the happiest loves have been those which were once only tender regards—kindly intimacies, associated with a complete and happy trustfulness. I don't believe in a love which is of hasty growth; at least, I know it is never the happiest."

As Lester heard this, he thought of Georgine Bryant. How much of tender regard, of kindly intimacy had there been between them, before

he felt that he loved her ! Qualities which might have repelled many a man, only drew him the closer to her. Her vanity, her ambition, her heedlessness, her thoughtlessness—even her selfishness—all these qualities were mingled with some nameless attractions in that strange crucible, whence came that intoxicating something which made him love her.

“Blessed are the imperfect,” says Balzac, “for to them belongs the kingdom of Love.” And cannot many a man’s experience testify to the truth that he has loved what has seemed the least inviting—hugged to his heart the very faults and failings which, the world would think, had been a barrier to his passion ?

“And you think Blanche likes me, mother ?”

“I am sure of it. It has long been my wish that you should make her your wife ; but I have never until now named the existence of such a wish. I should be sorry to influence you to pursue any course of which you might have afterwards to repent. I do not wish to persuade you now. I merely tell you what I know, Les-

ter, and I leave it to you to determine what you shall do."

In his restless, dissatisfied mood, Lester was not disinclined to take advantage of what his mother had told him. He was impulsive. Every hope of making Georgine Bryant his wife had died out of his heart. But why should he not make Blanche Legh? She loved him, and in time he might come to love her as a husband. With her he would undoubtedly lead a life of calm happiness. And would it not be best for him to content himself with this? So he reasoned—somewhat mournfully, it must be admitted—and when he had brought his reflection to a conclusion, he said—

"I will think a little more about what you've told me, mother; and one of these days I'll mention the result to Petite."

The time comes when he has thought a little more about the matter, and he finds himself alone with Petite, wandering about the lanes of Haystone, now yellow with autumn. He really likes her, he says to himself, and then he tells her so. She murmurs that she is very happy,

and that she has loved him long—oh ! so long ! Returning home, he leads Petite in by the hand to Mrs. Temple, and says :—

“ Here is my wife, mother ! ”

And Petite falls sobbing on Mrs. Temple’s breast, who soothes her, with very endearing words. Petite rests her head a long while on that breast, sobbing ; but she is happy—very happy. Add up all the bliss which has rained down upon her during her past life—Lester’s kindness—his various returns from school—his interest in her interests—the dawning hope that he would love her, as she loved him, when, months ago, he had drawn her towards him and kissed her—and the added-up sum would fail to equal the bliss she feels now, knowing that he has called her—wife !

But this engagement is not to be noised abroad. Petite is just as eager as he is that the happy truth should be kept secret awhile, and come out eventually by accident. Our sham miseries we communicate eloquently to our neighbours ; our real we conceal in the dark caverns of our own bosom. It is the same with

sham and real happiness ; the first anyone may participate in, the second we reserve in glorious selfishness for ourselves, and for ourselves alone.

It is evening, and to-morrow Lester is going away. His destination is London. His restlessness has left him, and he feels some stirring of his old ambition. What better place can he go to than London for giving initiatory exercise to it? There are men of note there of whom he knows something ; and he is about to seek them out, with such specimens of his musically artistic powers, as he deems most worthy of notice. He will stay in London some little while, studying or working, as circumstances shall suggest best ; but he will keep in constant correspondence with Blanche, and return one day and marry her. He is the Lester Temple of old now—hopeful and sunny, full of projects for the future, and in the best of spirits. Loved as he is by one of those grand, honest, and pure hearts—so tender, and yet so passionate—he ought, indeed, to consider himself an especially favoured mortal ; and, sitting with his mother alone this evening (Petite is in the next

room, playing, with exquisite grace, snatches from the "Pastorale" of Beethoven), he says to her :—

"I think I ought to be contented, mother, now. Petite is a dear little angel ; and, whether I eventually fail or succeed, I am independent of fortune."

"You ought to be contented, Lester."

They were silent awhile. The sweet strains reach them from the other room, and they sit listening to them. In a while they cease, and Petite is heard singing. She is singing one of Pierre Dupont's *chansons*, and its pathos thrills through mother and son.

"Mother," says Lester, in a whisper ; "Petite has been so accustomed to live with you as a daughter, and I have known her so long, that I have had but little curiosity to hear her past history—the history as to the manner that she came to live with you. During my father's life-time, if I was ever inquisitive to be made acquainted with the particulars, he used, I fancied, to hush me, as if he did not care that I should know them. When I was last at Hay-

stone, his death had only just taken place, and it never occurred to me to ask you, mother, to satisfy me on some points that I wish to be satisfied upon now."

"Since your return to England," said Mrs. Temple, "I have thought more than once of telling you how it was that Blanche came to live with us. I have often wondered why you did not seem curious; and then I explained to myself why you had not, in the way that you have just now."

"Hush, mother! Petite has finished."

But she again struck some tender chords, and her voice blended in some sweet French song with the tones of the piano.

"As briefly as I can I will tell you the story. As we—your father and I—were travelling France some years ago, we stayed at a little village near Lisieux. At the inn where we lodged a lady was lying very ill. She had been there for weeks—had been confined there; and though some time had elapsed since then, she had not recovered. She had no friends, and her friendless condition excited a good deal of

curiosity. Your father and I were—as you may suppose—a good deal interested in her. As she still continued ill, and as the doctor of the village (a sadly unskilful man) gave us little hope when we ever enquired after her, your father, as a surgeon, courteously informed him as to his profession, and volunteered his services. The offer was accepted; my husband accompanied the regular medical attendant to the lady's room. When I saw my husband again I knew that something serious had happened. Before I could ask him any questions he told me that he had known this lady in England; that in his opinion she had fled with some gentleman; that there had been a marriage, false or real, he could not say which, and that she was now deserted by him. She was a French lady, and had been a governess at a friend's house of his in London."

"And her name?" said Lester.

"Was Cecile Marescôt. When your father saw her she was in a dying state; the next day she died, leaving her child to the care of the world.

He had known her by the name of Marescôt, and it would seem that her parents were dead. As to the parentage of the child on the father's side he could learn nothing. To make a long story a short one, at my suggestion the child was adopted by us. What her fate would have been had we not adopted her I cannot say ; but so loving as she is now,—so true, so good, such a companion as she has been to me, I can never regret having treated her as my own daughter. Can you fear, Lester, to take her as your wife ?”

“ No, mother, no. But the name, you gave her ?”

“ Her first name, Blanche, your father's fancy suggested ; the other was the name of a distant relative of his : I can give you no special motive for our adopting it. And now you know Petite's history. I hope you will love her, Lester, and never cause her to regret that she knew us, but to wish that she had grown up nameless and in poverty.”

The piano ceased now, and Petite glided into the room, and placed her hand in that of her affianced husband's.

It is the next day, and Lester is going away. Walking with his mother and Petite to the station, it is not strange that he recalls the incident of his departure from Haystone some months since, when he was going away on a different mission to his present.

"And you have never seen or heard anything of the man we met at the station?" said he.

"Never. Poor man! I wonder what became of him?"

"It is very curious, Petite, but I have seen some one much like him,—a gentleman by the name of Hamperton, and this gentleman tells a story of his being enquired for at various places by a person who so much resembles him. It may be the very man upon whom you took pity."

"Perhaps, Lester. He would not tell me his name, nor his past history. I often sit thinking and wondering who he can be."

They are at the station now; and on the platform, waiting, as it would seem, for the arrival of some one by the train, are people whom Lester knows. One is little Emily Bryant, the other Miss Lilian Graham, conspicuous for

her aristocratic nose, and for qualities supposed to bespeak aristocratic descent; the third is Sibylla Proby. Lester notices that she has an anxious look upon her face.

Walking up to him, she says, when she has shaken hands with him—

“Do you hear much of our friend, now, Mr. Temple?” ;

“Of Robert, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I have not heard from him lately.”

“They tell me that he has become very rich,” Sibylla remarks in an uneasy voice.

“Yes, he has,” says Lester; and he wonders, naturally enough, why Sibylla has not heard as much from Robert’s own lips.

“When do you return to Messingham?”

“Not yet,” is Sibylla’s answer. “Emily’s sister is coming to-day to stay at the Grahams’. We have come to the station to meet her.”

“Georgine Bryant!” says Lester, with surprise.

“Yes, Georgine Bryant.”

A strange feeling passes over Lester Temple

as he hears this name, and knows that Georgine will soon be in the place he is leaving. But there is no time for indulging in surprise. Two trains are coming to the two platforms ; and one is to take him to London.

As he bids Petite and his mother farewell ; as he sits back in the carriage bearing him away, one thought monopolises his mind. It is no dream of the ambition he hopes soon to satisfy ; it is no fond remembrance of the loving heart he has left behind him ; it is that Georgine will be at Haystone. Georgine !

END OF BOOK THE THIRD.

BOOK THE FOURTH.

THE OLD BATTLE.

CHAPTER I.

GEORGINE IS EARNEST.

SIBYLLA had not been at Messingham many weeks before the health of her little pupil failed, and a change of air was suggested as likely to be beneficial. Emily Bryant had hitherto derived much benefit from staying at Haystone, with some friends of Mr. Bryant, named Graham, who were altogether people of county note ; and upon Dr. Kealwin's advice, only a day or two before his strange death, Emily, accompanied by Miss Proby, went there. A certain aristocratic Miss Graham, had always been a friend of Georgine ; and before Emily Bryant returned

home, a letter came from her, inviting Georgine to come to Haystone as well. It so happened that her arrival and Lester's departure took place on the same day.

The Grahams were by far the most notable people in Haystone. With the Temples they had little in common. Even when Lester's father was thought to have been a man of property, and to have intended bringing up his son for an independent life, there was no great intercourse between the families. Mrs. Graham bowed graciously to Mrs. Temple. Miss Lilian Graham—the elder daughter—was at times moderately friendly with Blanche ; but the friendliness came by fits and starts ; Miss Graham's eminently aristocratic nose, bridging itself coldly, and proudly one day before her, and unbridging itself, as if it temporarily forgot its aristocratic descent, the next.

When Blanche saw a very handsome young lady step out of the train, and join the Grahams, she looked towards her with a good deal of curiosity. She had heard what Sibylla told

Lester, and knew therefore that she was one of those Bryants with whom he had been living, and whom he had mentioned more than once in his letters from the Priory. Petite had no suspicion of those passages which had passed between Lester Temple and Georgine; though she was fain to admit that Miss Bryant was so pretty that anyone might fall in love with her. Petite did not see her again for some days. When she next saw her she was introduced to her.

Blanche had a class at the Sunday school; as indeed all the young ladies in the place had, who cared to make themselves useful. Miss Graham had a class, to whom she gave the full benefit of her aristocratic nose, when she was questioning them as to their various duties, and the promises which their godfathers and godmothers did for them in their baptism, wherein they were made, &c., &c., &c. On the Sunday succeeding Lester Temple's departure from Haystone, and Georgine Bryant's arrival, Miss Graham came to the school, accompanied by Sibylla Proby and Georgine. Blanche had

been there some time, making stupid little heads clear, and dull little eyes bright, if not always with intelligence, with gratitude, at least, for her kindness and care. Miss Graham was so much minded to consider the fact of her taking a class at all as a work of supererogation, that she thought it a little matter whether she came late or early.

Entering the school-room—her silk dress rustling eloquently—she said:—

“Oh, Miss Legh, I hope these children are not naughty to-day. I’ve brought a friend to see them, and it will be so painful if they misbehave themselves. Georgine dear” — the friend—“this is Miss Legh—eh—?” And then it occurred to Miss Graham that Blanche was the adopted sister of the gentleman, whom an unexpected piece of good fortune had suddenly released from the necessity of earning his living by playing the part of tutor to Georgine’s brother; and she made some hazy remark explanatory of the relationship, which caused Georgine to regard Blanche interestedly.

Leaving Miss Bryant to make out the

character of the relationship as well as she could, Lilian Graham carried herself to her class, and with this class, plunged into the Church Catechism.

"I didn't quite understand Miss Graham," said Georgine to Blanche; "did she say that you were Mr. Temple's half sister?"

"No. His adopted sister."

Georgine nodded her head, and was awhile silent, looking at Petite. Petite at being asked this question shewed no confusion. The happy secret of being more than Lester's adopted sister, was something too precious to be exposed in ever so little way as yet; and Blanche had a control of face which few people would have given her credit for.

"No, Mason—you do not renounce the pumps and vanities of this wicked world—you renounce its pomps and vanities. And, Mason, get up and open the window—no, the door. No—the window—not so high. Stay." And then Miss Graham, whose conflicting orders had all been obeyed by a fat little damsel called

Mason, turned distractedly towards Blanche, and said :—

“Oh, Miss Legh, where is the wind? Does it come through the door, or through the window? It is so hot; but I am afraid to sit in a draught.”

Blanche immediately got up and made such arrangements with the door and windows as to admit the necessary amount of air which Miss Graham required, and yet to prevent a draught.

“Thanks,” said the young lady, “I feel so much more comfortable.” And now, Mason, go on. Oh, but this is wretched! Mason, your ignorance is shocking. The next girl. And can’t you answer, Springett?—nor you, Quinhey?” And having bridged her nose at several girls who were not ready with their answers, Miss Graham laid her prayer-book down, and turned round, towards Blanche, remarking—“I am bewildered! These girls don’t know a line! What can I do with them, Miss Legh?”

Miss Legh suggested to Miss Graham the

most natural thing in the world, namely, that the children should be given back their books, re-study their Catechism, and come up again when they might be supposed to have mastered it. Accepting this suggestion as though it exactly coincided with her own views, Lilian Graham once more turned towards her class, and said—

“You are very naughty girls! open your books once more, and re-commence your studies.”

Georgine looked on smiling. More evident to her than anything else happening in this school-room this Sunday morning, was Lilian Graham's patronage of Blanche, with a habit of referring to her when the simplest difficulty arose, and of an amiability on Blanche's part, and an eagerness to do one any service that lay in her power, that would win every one's love. For some cause or other, Georgine felt herself drawn affectionately towards Petite. Given rather to a habit of patronising herself, and of treating certain persons with a good-natured contempt, Miss Bryant could not find it in her

power to patronise Petite, or to treat her with any indifference or pride. It might be that the relationship of Blanche with a certain person she knew had propitiated her favour, or that the young girl's unvarying gentleness and regard for others, manifested in certain infinitesimal things occurring in this school, being quite a new experience to Georgine, caused Georgine to like her, and to watch her doings with her class with attentive and regardful eyes. There were plenty of little girls at Messingham who would have been thankful if the beautiful Miss Bryant had only taken a tithe of the trouble which Blanche was now taking with these classes, and Georgine was beginning to regret that she had not.

"What a deal of trouble you take, and how kind you are," said Georgine to Petite.

In the meantime Miss Graham had once more drawn up her class before her, prefacing the performance which was about to take place with these words—"I trust you will not disgrace yourselves any more."

I am sorry to say that Lilian Graham still found her class very ignorant. Orthodoxy was sadly outraged by the young ladies who stood in her presence with their hands drawn penitentially behind them. That marvellous composition called the "Desire," was sadly tortured; and the mesdemoiselles Mason, Springett, Quinney, and others desired things which no right-minded young person ought to desire, and all of them seemed very much puzzled what to do with their ghostly enemy. The greatest culprit was Mason. The others did, after a good deal of trouble, get their ghostly enemy into the right place; managed, after much floundering, to comprehend the nature of baptism; and having, for a time, been rather uncertain about it, determined at last upon living in charity with all men; a statement upon the part of young females which to a person unacquainted with our Catechism, might, in its liberality of sentiment, seem to indicate a reprehensible laxity of morals. But Mason was wrong everywhere, and Miss Graham, rising from her seat, exclaimed—

"I shall report you, Mason ; your ignorance is flagrant."

At this Mason began to weep ; and fearful of being reported to the clergyman, who visited the short-comings of the school-girls with various heavy penalties apportioned to their degrees of heinousness, cried out—

"That she would learn it, she would learn it, and would not do so any more, if Miss Graham would only excuse what she had done to-day."

But Miss Graham would not excuse it. Were she to do so, she would only be encouraging the idleness and ignorance of such girls as Mason.

Hearing the girls crying and Miss Graham's angry words, Blanche looked up. There was something in her face as she turned it towards Mason which raised the girl's spirits. Georgine noticed this, as she noticed that every girl to whom Blanche bent a kind look or spoke a kind word, was pleased and grateful ; and as she noticed that Miss Graham gave neither kind words nor kind looks.

“Mason is incorrigible,” said Lilian ; “I can do nothing with her ; it is most annoying, for the trouble I have expended on her is immense. Georgine, you don’t know what it is to be annoyed by a number of girls who will not obey, and whose ignorance of their Catechism makes one’s blood run cold.”

It was quite true that Georgine was ignorant of such matters ; but she had perception enough to discern that the trouble expended by Miss Graham upon any of her pupils was very hypothetical.

“It is curious,” responded Georgine, with good-tempered spite ; “but Miss Legh doesn’t seem to have much difficulty with her pupils. What they have to learn they seem to learn well !”

“Oh, yes ; I dare say. It is curious. I have thought so before this. Every Sunday morning is a misery to me. I never enjoy the service—I cannot. The reflection that the girls, with whom I have taken so much trouble—studying their peculiarities of temper, their

deficiencies and their weakness, and adopting my course to them accordingly—make such an inadequate return, is harrowing—very harrowing. I wish——”

Suddenly Miss Graham stopped, and as suddenly went on.

“I wish, Miss Legh, you would make an exchange with me. I should be so much obliged. I don’t ask this as a favour only, but that you may have some congenial work. You seem to exercise special influence over Mason, and two or three more of my class. Perhaps your other duties bring you into closer intercourse with them in their homes. I wish you would take her and Springett, Quinney and Bowler (Bowler’s nails are always dirty), into your class, and give me in exchange, Mitchell, Snelling, Mayhew, and Davison. I fancy I could get on better with these four.”

Which was not at all wonderful, seeing that they composed the cream of the class with which Blanche had to do.

“Lilian,” said Georgine, “what an unrea-

sonable request of you to make of Miss Legh!"

"Unreasonable!" cried Lilian.

"I don't mind making the exchange," said Blanche, softly. "After to-day, I shall take Mason, Springett, Quinney, and Bowler."

Whereupon there was corresponding joy in the hearts of those four young ladies, and depression in the hearts of those who were to sit at the feet of Miss Graham.

"How good and considerate you are," said Georgine to Petite, with admiration.

"Good and considerate," was the cry of every one who knew her. "Good and considerate," even the aristocratic nose of Miss Graham would have said, could it for a moment have disengaged itself from its unvarying statement, that it came over with William the Conqueror, and had something to do with all the important events in English history from that day until this.

It is quite possible that Georgine Bryant would have been less interested in Blanche, and less inclined to praise her, had this little scene

in the school-room have happened a few months ago. She was in a humour to be softened and touched now. Lester Temple had not left the Priory long before she became restless and dissatisfied with herself. Whether or not she had been false to herself and false to him, when she said that she did not love him, she could not disguise from herself that she missed him very much. Her sister rallied her. She laughed back the rallying, but the laugh had a ring of insincerity about it, and Georgine was not herself. She was moody and excited by turns. Never very diligent in those little matters which give young ladies an opportunity of employing energies which would otherwise have been wasted, she was less diligent than ever, now, save at certain fitful moments, when she would launch off unexpectedly upon some unusually hard work, such, for instance, as re-furbishing up her French, or German. An invitation to stay at Haystone was very welcome. Was it any the more welcome because Lester Temple lived there?

It chanced that after this meeting at the

school, Miss Bryant and Blanche Legh met frequently. So eager did Georgine seem to be with Petite, that Miss Graham felt herself aggrieved, and accused her friend of neglecting her society for that of a chit. Georgine accompanied Petite on her visiting rounds, and became familiar with scenes she had never witnessed before. What a brightness Petite's presence carried whithersoever she went ! How eager and grateful faces were when they met hers ! With Georgine at her side, wondering at her unselfishness, she went to cottages where poverty and sickness were making ghastly work ; rousing many a sorrowing heart, giving brightness to many a haggard eye, and going away thanked, as though she had been an angel despatched from heaven on a mission of beneficence ! Moody old women grew cheery when she spoke to them. Selfish, quarrelsome old women, whose future years in this world must be brief indeed, grew kindly on their views of others, and hoped that they should die at enmity with nobody. Old men, bent and broken, welcomed her as though she were the possessor of some charm

which gave them new life. Little children in glad troops would come out to meet her, and no child was so happy when it met Petite, but it was happier when Petite had left her with the gift of a kind word. Mothers were proud to lay their babies in her arms, and she would kiss the least inviting urchin and make it smile. The man, whose mouth was foul with oaths before she came, softened at her words, promising to amend, and blessing her as she went away. And angry women, angry with their husbands, the world, or with themselves, would yield to the potency of her gentle words, and bid their fiery tempers droop and die. If the prayer of every heart to bless her had been granted openly, as it was secretly, in some mysterious way, the least believing would have seen in her, indeed, a favoured one of Heaven !

Georgine Bryant was greatly touched. If Petite wrought a good work in all to whom she was a messenger of kindness, she wrought a good work in Georgine, though she knew it not. Every kind word spoken, every kind act

shown by her to those who stood in earnest need of kindest words and kindest acts, touched a chord in Georgine Bryant's breast, which had never been touched before. Idle of habit, and luxuriously brought up, much that was good in her was hardened until she saw Petite. Petite's influence could not have worked at any time better than it was working now. Regarding Lester Temple more deeply than she had tried to persuade herself, and tried with only half success, she felt an emptiness in her life, when he had gone at her foolish bidding, that fitted her well to receive the good seed Petite was now unconsciously sowing.

The kindly influence worked rapidly. It was not long before she saw the worthlessness of her past life, and wished her future to be a better one. All that was good and true in her, awoke, and cried shame on her wilfulness, and littleness, and folly. If therefore she recognised her many false positions in the past, is it wonderful that she came at last to recognise one which was supremely false? one which towered above the rest of her shortcom-

ings, conspicuous for its outrage upon all that was best and most genuine in her? Associating with Blanche Legh, and feeling her better nature awakened by this association, Georgine Bryant came at last to see that her falsehood to Lester Temple was great indeed. For awhile her ambition and her vanity had supported her—the one saying that to marry him would be for her to throw herself away, and the other that she had no love for him. The scales had fallen from her eyes now : the lie which she had told him was revealed in all its ugly nakedness. Loved him? Yes. It was vain to pretend that she did not. Nor would she pretend. The strong desire to be true in the future, in all her life and dealings, forbade that she should be untrue now, when arraigning herself for judgment upon this matter.

Walking with Petite one day—she had been staying at Haystone some time then—she said : —“ I suppose you hear often from your adopted brother, Mr. Temple?” Strange as it may seem, she had put but few questions to Petite

relative to Lester, though she listened with great interest whenever Petite happened to mention his name.

“ Oh, yes—frequently. It will not be very long, I think, before he returns. We thought when he went to London that he would have stayed much longer than it seems it is his intention to do. I have told him that I know you ; and when he writes he always mentions your name. I am sure he was very happy at Messingham.”

“ You think so ? When he was there did he ever mention my name in his letters to you ? ”

“ Frequently. You were all so kind to him, he said ; and he liked you so much.”

“ I am glad of that.” And Georgine wondered whether Lester had ever told Blanche that he had said he loved her. She believed that he had not. Or surely Blanche would never have seemed to like her as she did.

“ Coming to Haystone soon,” thought Georgine, as she parted from Miss Legh. “ Then I may see him again. And always to have spoken

kindly of me—when I was often so ungracious and so unkind to him. Oh, Lester! I know I loved now. Can I ever humble myself enough?”

CHAPTER II.

WHAT CAN I DO ?

“AND are you going to see Miss Legh to-day?” The questioner was Miss Graham; and she to whom she put the question was Georgine Bryant.

“Yes—I think of going to see her.”

“What attraction you can find in that girl, I am puzzled to discover. Dear Georgine, you seem quite infatuated with her!”

“Do I?” And Georgine went on with the letter she was writing.

“Quite! If she was engaged to anyone, the man would be quite jealous.”

"Perhaps she may be engaged."

"If she were I should have heard of it, I think. At least you surely would ; for of course she tells you all her secrets !"

"What nonsense you are talking, Lilian. Secrets ! I am sure Miss Legh has never made me her confidante !"

"No. This puzzles me more and more. You are so frequently with her : you never seem so happy as when you are in her society. I quite thought that she reposed her confidence in you ; and that you paid her the return compliment of reposing yours in her !"

"I can assure you, my dear Lilian, that you are very much in error."

"Then, how is it, Georgine, that you are so marvellously anxious to be with her ? It was only yesterday that you would not go to an archery meeting, only for the reason that you had engaged to meet Miss Legh : and the day before that you must leave my side for her, as we were out walking, as if you didn't care for my society at all. Oh, I was so hurt, Georgine ; you don't know how hurt I was !"

"I am sorry to hear you say this, Lilian. I had no idea that I had hurt you!"

"I dare say: I dare say," whined Lilian. "Well—well, of course if it gives you any great satisfaction to frequent Miss Legh's society, I have nothing to say against it. I have no doubt that she is very amiable—as amiable as a person in her position in society can well be."

"What do you mean by saying 'as a person in her position in society can well be?' I really can't see, Lilian, that her position is any so much below our own. She is a lady in thought and conduct: and I must admit that she is a good deal cleverer than I am!"

Lilian opened her eyes.

"What can have come to you, Georgine? What can have come to you? I never saw a girl so altered. You are the last person in the world who, I should have thought, would have taken a fancy for a girl like Blanche—the last person in the world too to speak of *equality*, because a person may happen to be tolerably well educated, and not bad looking. I am quite amazed at the change which has taken place in

you ; and what I am to attribute it to, I don't know. You must have been reading some horrid books, or listening to some horrid clergyman."

Georgine only laughed, and said, "Possibly." Miss Graham, her aristocratic nose evidently much injured by the levelling sentiments entertained by her friend, and bridging itself more uncompromisingly than ever, as if to say that it at least should not be levelled though society was, relapsed into silence and a novel.

"Have you any message to send to Olivia?" asked Georgine.

"Oh, yes ; give my kindest love, and my best congratulations. I trust she'll find herself happy with Mr. Evershed."

Georgine wrote as bidden. When she had done so, her sister Emily entered the drawing-room, of whom she asked whether she had any communications to send home.

"Yes, Georgine, dear ; give my love to papa, to Harry, to Olivia, and to the gentleman she's going to marry. For she is going to marry, isn't she?"

"Perhaps."

"What's the gentleman like?"

"He's dark, for one thing."

"Then I don't like him—I don't like dark people; they are never good. I've just been reading a pretty story—such a pretty story—and the naughty man who never goes to church, and who does all sorts of wicked things, is dark—so dark; and the good man—the nice clergyman, who never does anything wrong—has beautiful fair hair, and such sweet heavenly blue eyes. I am sure I sha'n't like Olivia's beau if he's dark."

"Then, dear, Olivia will have no occasion to be jealous of you. But I suppose though he is dark, I am to send Mr. Evershed your love?"

"Mr. Evershed! is that his name? Well, that's a nice name. Yes, you may send him my love; but I sha'n't kiss him unless I like him."

And while Georgine finished her letter by giving her little sister's sentiments with regard to the virtues of dark-complexioned gentlemen,

Emily bounded out of the room, and made her way to Miss Proby, who happened to be walking alone in the garden.

The intense heart-weariness from which she was suffering had set its ineffaceable marks upon her face. The splendid eyes looked haggard and worn; the rich, full lips had lost their colour; the complexion its healthy hue. In person she was thinner, her dress clinging lightly where it was wont to swell out about her shapely bust, but her grace and dignity remained unchanged—unchanged in voice and bearing. Nobody looking at her could have thought otherwise than that she was unhappy; but she was the last woman to whom one could offer pity or sympathy with any enjoyable amount of self-complacency. I am weary, I am miserable, the face said unmistakably; and just as unmistakably, but I care to receive no words of comfort from you. Georgine and Olivia had found this out before she had been at Messingham many days, and had shaped their conduct accordingly. Her father had suddenly failed, and as suddenly died, and she, with the

only resources of a superior womanly intelligence, was thrown upon the world to earn her own livelihood as best she could. So much Mrs. Prince and her sister knew. That she had been unhappy in some love story they knew too, though they were of course ignorant of its particulars. Of the remorse which was tearing Sibylla's heart for having, by her persuasion, brought her father to ruin and the grave; of the passionate love, for whose indulgence she had so rashly acted, they guessed nothing.

She had not been at Haystone long before rumours reached her that Robert Evershed had suddenly become a rich man. A strange joy thrilled her heart when she heard this intelligence. The barrier which once existed between them was no more—he was free to make her his wife. Days passed on, and she heard nothing from him; days became weeks; then came the news that Mrs. Evershed was dead. Sibylla little guessed the last words of the dying woman. If Robert was kept from her, it was because his mother kept him. With her death, would he not be the more likely to

come ? The passing time, in which he did not come, answered her. Weariness settled upon her heart again. The bright break in the sky was closed up by clouds of darkness denser than ever. Soon she heard that Robert was at Messingham, having visited the Priory on business connected with his position as chief legatee under Dr. Kealwin's will. From him there came no letters—not a line—not a message. Her sorrow deepened into despair.

She had no spirit to exert herself. Her duties in connexion with Emily Bryant were light ; there was nothing in them to draw her thoughts away from the agonising conviction that she was no longer cared for. Her mind seemed imprisoned in some dark gaol from which there was no escape, and into which no light penetrated.

" Oh, what is the matter with you, Miss Proby ?" said Emily, after she had left her sister writing home.

" Nothing," responded Sibylla, wearily.

" Oh, but I say there is—there must be. I wonder everybody isn't happy. I should think

my sister Olivia must be happy, because she's in love."

Sibylla gave an inward mocking laugh. Her experience had caused her to form quite a different view of matters to this.

"I've never seen the gentleman she's engaged to," Emily prattled on; "I don't think I shall quite like him, for he's dark. But he has such a pretty name—just such a name as you see in a book."

Sibylla was listening so mechanically to all this—hearing and not hearing—that she felt no curiosity to ask his name.

"His name is Evershed, Miss Proby."

She gave no cry of surprise or pain, for so keen were both, that power of speech was suspended. It seemed to her as if all her vital strength concentrated itself suddenly into one agonising sense, then as suddenly ebbed, leaving her prostrate with utter weakness. Emily noticed no unusual emotion, but kept prattling on, and then hurried away across the lawn, leaving Sibylla alone.

She sate down on one of the garden chairs;

the shrubs, the trees, the flowers, the conservatory, grew misty — became indistinct — vanished. In ten minutes' time she knew that she had swooned ; and then she dragged her body—its pride of movement broken—to the house.

“What can I do?” we often ask in our despair, as if we had no power in us to help ourselves. But there was no foolishness in Sibylla Proby's despair, or helpfulness in her power of thought, when she put up this question from the depths of her agonised heart.

CHAPTER III.

AN UNEXPECTED REVELATION.

GEORGINE BRYANT did not allow the words of Miss Graham to have any effect upon her purpose. She had promised to call on Blanche Legh, and in fulfilment of her promise she set out, when she had finished her letter to her sister, leaving Lilian to enjoy her opinions upon Georgine's apparent infatuation as best she might.

"I really wonder at you, Georgine ; I do !" So spoke Miss Graham, as she witnessed her friend's departure. "Whatever can you find so wonderfully attractive in that little girl ? If her

adopted brother, or cousin, or whatever he is, were at home, I should think that you went after him."

"But as he does not happen to be at home?" said Georgine, saucily turning on her friend.

"I am left to conjecture a thousand things. A thousand things. Well! go. I won't hinder you. I can only lament that my society cannot afford you more gratification."

Georgine laughed, and went.

Did you ever experience that strange sensation of seeming a different person to the person you were wont to seem—of thinking thoughts to which you were unaccustomed—of following habits to which you were unfamiliar—of having, in short, your whole personality transformed: the *ego* of to-day being dressed in a strangely different habiliment of individuality to the *ego* of yesterday.

If this has ever been your experience, you will be able to realise in some measure the experience of Georgine Bryant as she made her way to the house where Blanche Legh lived.

She felt that she was changed, and she wondered at the change. But a little while ago, how vain she was, and how purposeless her life. She had repented of her vanity ; and she had determined that her life should be a purposeless one no longer. Which was the false Georgine Bryant, and which was the real one? I am inclined to believe that the real Georgine Bryant, was the Georgine Bryant now walking to meet Blanche Legh, and that the false was that young lady who had treated Lester Temple with unquestionable rudeness during the earlier days of his sojourn at Messingham, who had frittered her time away over useless employments, who, in her vanity, had attempted certain artistical and musical achievements which she could not accomplish, and who had turned a deaf ear to the honest pleading of an honest man's love. We live a dishonest life for years (by this, I mean that we are false to ourselves ; often, owing to the force of circumstances, and to the lack of some one influence which can make us true), and we suddenly find we have been doing so, and that only our present hopes and purposes represent

our real selves. Georgine Bryant was not given greatly to introspection. Nevertheless she did know that she was not what she was ; and that she looked back with shame upon some past vanity and selfishness on her part.

Walking towards the house where she was to see Blanche, Miss Bryant asked herself how she could best meet Lester Temple, when he returned.

If Georgine Bryant met him, as Georgine Bryant now was, he would at once perceive that she had changed. And could she act a part ? Or could she disguise from him that she regretted the miserable deception which had parted them ? If he loved her still, would it not be better on her part to be entirely honest ?—and though the task she had to take was no easy one—to humble herself and tell him that she had been false ? She did not disguise from herself that she loved him. Should she disguise it from him ? Then came the question ; would he forgive her ? Surely any man would pardon a woman who humbled herself before him.

To Petite she had said nothing yet as to

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what troubled her thoughts so much; never asking a question about Lester in any tone which might seem to indicate that she was especially interested in him. And this conduct on her part had undoubtedly the effect of silencing any confession Petite might have made with regard to her engagement to Lester. It is true that he had wished this engagement to be kept secret, but Petite was not unlikely to have revealed it to Georgine, whom she liked, if Georgine had been in the habit of alluding in any way to the existence of Mr. Temple. As it was both these girls had been secret upon matters which engaged their greatest interests.

Poor Georgine ! How ignorant she was of the truth. How little she guessed that the love in her heart for Lester Temple had a passionate rival in the heart of Petite.

"I am so glad you've come," cried Blanche, when Miss Bryant appeared. "I had almost given you up."

"I've had several letters to write," said Georgine in explanation, "or I should have

come before." Petite brought out her drawings to show Georgine, and played to please Georgine.

"I only wish I could draw as well as you, and play as well," said Miss Bryant; and then her thoughts wandered away to the Priory, and to those incidents in which the pencil and the piano had something to do, and Lester Temple also.

"You play as well as your brother," said Georgine.

At the word brother, a faint blush, unperceived by Georgine, spread over Blanche's face. "Indeed I do not," cried Petite. "And by the way—we expect him home to-day or to-morrow. He has been so successful—and only in such a short time. He writes home in such spirits. He has composed a cantata, which certain experienced critics have pronounced very fine—and he'll be a great man, I'm sure!"

A twinge of jealousy shot through Georgine's heart. Might not this success of his be a rival to his love for her?

"Coming home to-day or to-morrow," said she musingly. "I—I've something to say. Can you listen patiently?"

“Of course I can.”

“I have a confession to make,” Georgine continued, “and I should like to make it before Mr. Temple returned. Do you know that you have been my good angel? That but for you I should have been miserable, and worthless. Oh, Blanche dear, you don’t know what I have been—how vain—how thoughtless—how indifferent to every duty a woman should delight in. I have been neither kind nor true! I have been self-indulgent,—and care for others was the last care I had. Ask Lilian Graham what I used to be. Ask those who know me most. Ask Mr. Temple. If he has ever spoken kindly of me, it was not that I was kind to him. No. No. In my miserable, miserable vanity I despised him, or tried to despise him, because he was so much cleverer—so much better than I. To him I was contemptuous and ungracious: I was everything a woman can be to make a man hate her, and yet—Oh, Blanche, if I make this confession it is because you have made me better; because the little good there is in me has been stirred by

you—until I saw you, I did not know how imperfect I was, or how useless my life had been. I had done no good to any one.”

“No, no, Georgine. You are disparaging yourself, I am sure!”

“Indeed — indeed, I’m not. I am only speaking too rightly of my own shortcomings. I only wish you could see what I was, and what I hope to be, so that you might know how great is the good that you have done. Your earnest kindness—your gentle consideration for others—your bright freedom from selfishness, were qualities I had never seen before: and they have worked in me for good. You cannot guess how keenly I have watched you, and how great an interest I have had in seeking your society in preference to others. You have shamed my idleness by your energy—my selfishness by your self-denial—my indifference to other’s needs by your carefulness. If I ever do any worthy thing, I shall thank you, dear Blanche, for your good example, without which it would never be done.”

Petite took Georgine’s hand and pressed it,

saying—"You think too much of my influence, Georgine."

"I cannot think too much of it. And I wish you to know that I am speaking only what is strictly true. I am not depreciating myself that you may seem the better—far, far from it. And take my thanks, dear Blanche, for what you have done!"

"If I have indeed done all you tell me, I can only say that I am very glad, and that I did not know I was doing so much good."

There was a pause again. One pretty girl confessing shortcomings to another, cannot be otherwise than a very charming sight; and if Lester Temple had been present, his pencil would have had a scene worthy of its skill. In tracing the two figures,—so striking was the contrast between them,—where would his hand have lingered with lovingly artistic fondness? On her, whose hair was dark, and whose countenance, so radiant with its serenity and lovingness, might have been an angel's: or on her with that light brown hair rippling downwards from the low forehead—

with that handsome face—handsome with the earthly characteristics of flashing eye, and richly hued complexion? Oh, mortal yielding flesh, on which head would the artist's pencil have stayed the longer, enamoured of its work?

Georgine broke the silence, looking at Petite as she spoke.

“Oh, tell Mr. Temple what I have told you. Let him know the good work you have done me, for my sake. I owe him reparation—great reparation. If you tell him what I have told you, he may accept it as a portion of my debt. You will tell him, Blanche?”

“If you wish it. But if you fancy that you ever treated him with disrespect or unkindness, I think I may assure you that he has already forgiven you. If he ever mentions your name in his letters now, it is always as if he liked you—as it was when he used to write from Messingham. And now that you have made this confession, Georgine, I will make one.”

“You! But I have not yet done.”

“Hear me first, Georgine. I have had a little secret, and you shall know it. I have told

no one yet ; and I know no one to whom I can tell it with more pleasure than I can tell you."

As yet Georgine had no suspicion of what she was to hear ; and she accepted the interruption of Petite with some pleasure, as she felt shy of making a full confession of what had passed between her and Lester Temple.

"But first," said Petite, "have you never guessed anything, when I by chance have mentioned Lester's name?"

"Guessed anything? What do you mean?"

"Ah, I see that you have had no suspicions, and I believe nobody else has as yet. Lester asked me to keep the matter a secret, and I have done so ; and I should do so from all but you."

Unseen by her, the door was opening slowly, and a person entering. At Blanche's words, and Blanche's arch look, Georgine was beginning to fear. Her heart beat quickly, and she fixed an anxious look upon Petite.

"Lester is something more than my brother. I love him more than any sister can. We are to be married——Lester!"

This last word she uttered with a cry of pleasure and surprise. It was he who had entered. Georgine turned quickly round. But for this unexpected entrance she would have received Petite's communication with evidences of more emotion.

"Oh, Lester!" said Petite, bounding forward to meet him; "how glad I am to see you! Why did you not say for certain that you intended to return to-day? And we were talking of you as you entered. You will forgive me, Lester—won't you? I have disobeyed you. I have just told Georgine what you enjoined me to keep a secret."

"I am glad to see you two so friendly," said Mr. Temple quietly, as he shook hands with Georgine.

"He does not care for me," she thought.

CHAPTER IV.

MISS BRYANT RESOLVES.

AN hour and a half afterwards, Miss Bryant was sitting at the toilette table in her bed-room, toying with the various articles which graced that piece of furniture. In such a fashion she had sat many a time, and her vanity had revealed to her many flattering stories. In listening to them hitherto, she had found an ever-satisfying pleasure. Now, the lively stories were told to a deaf ear. Her face was as lovely now as yesterday; but where there was then a smile of pride, there was a look of pain and humiliation: and eyes that once shone

with such unabashed brightness, were dim with tears.

Only a half an hour since, she had discovered that her hopes of regaining the affections of Lester Temple were scattered to the winds, and that she knew another had won the heart which might have been hers but for her miserable pride and vanity.

Georgine blamed herself. She was not so unwise as to cast a shadow of accusation against either Lester or Petite. What was more natural than that he, after her haughty refusal of his offer, should seek for consolation in the love of a girl like Blanche Legh? Women before now, thwarted in some dearly cherished hope, have avenged themselves by throwing themselves carelessly upon those whose regards they held in little value. Was a man more unlikely than a woman to be guilty of a like action? Georgine asked herself this question, and then asked herself another, which was more painful. Was it not very possible that Lester Temple cared for Petite sincerely? He had known her all his life; her character must be an open book to

her. The love which he had offered Georgine, might not that have been some ephemeral passion, inspired by her good looks, and very possibly provoked by the singular manner with which she had treated him? and the love which he gave Petite—might not this be the love of his life—that mysterious something which rarely falls within man's experience more than once? At any rate, whether Lester Temple had asked Blanche Legh to become his wife, out of pique at Georgine's conduct, or because he really cared for her, his manner towards Georgine to-day was free from anything which could indicate that he held her in any other light than that of an acquaintance who was many degrees above him in the social scale.

And, withal, Georgine loved him still. Bitterly blaming herself for the folly which had made her turn a deaf ear to the pleading of her love, she could not disguise from herself this fact. Her tears fell fast—tears of bitter self-humiliation—tears of regret that her desire was in the possession of another. For her own peace of mind it was necessary that she

should see Lester as little as possible. Petite might think it curious, if she were less intimate, than she had hitherto been, but she must check her intimacy, unless she wished to be thrown into the dangerous society of Lester Temple. Suddenly it occurred to her again that this gentleman had evidently given Blanche Legh no information as to what had passed between him and her. Was this because he did not care to make a confession of defeat? Or was this because—— Georgine hardly knew what !

“ Really ! I declare ! I’m astonished ! ”

These three exclamations, rising severally in the degrees of great surprise to that of profound astonishment, proceeded one morning from Lilian Graham’s lips, as that young lady was scanning the pages of the *Times* newspaper. Georgine Bryant and Miss Proby were present in the room when Miss Graham had reason to give such emphasis to her wonderment, and both looked towards her, seeking some explanation.

“ Well, I *am* astonished ! I never expected it ! ”

“Expected what, Lilian?” said Georgine.

Without replying, Miss Graham went on:—

“We must have him up here! As a candle he must not be put under a bushel. Oh dear, no! If there is one art in which I especially delight, it is the art of music; and if there is a class of persons whom I especially regard, it is that class which embodies beautiful aspirations in heart-thrilling notes! We must have him here! We must!”

“What do you mean? Who is he?”

“Why, Georgine, Mr. Temple, of course. Mr. Temple, who has been winning immortality by a cantata!”

“Mr. Temple!”

“Yes; Mr. Temple. There is a most flattering critique in the *Times* upon it. It was an immense success. ‘Mr. Temple, we are informed, has it in his power to win a most enviable position. His melodies are original and suggestive; his style broad and powerful; his treatment of his subject that of a thoroughly accomplished musician.’ So the paper says. What an honour! We must have him here!

He must give us a private performance of his cantata—that is to say, as well as one person can do such a thing. I will send him a note, and invite him up here, on as early a day as possible.”

“Lilian! Why? I should hardly think Mr. Temple would care to be lionised; and besides, he’ll think it curious that you, who never bestowed much notice upon him, should suddenly adopt a different treatment.”

‘There was a look upon Georgine’s face which said more than her words, and Sibylla Proby who had been sitting silently reading, remarked this look, and laid her book aside, a moment afterwards.

“But he must come, Georgine. I shall invite him. Why do you object? I thought you liked the Temples, as you always used to be so much in the society of Blanche Legh. Ah, how singular! you’ve not been to see her for a day or two—never since Mr. Temple’s return to the country. Is it possible that you don’t like him? Or, Georgine, is it possible that——what a curious idea has come into my

head—you like him too much? Now, really——”

“Stuff and nonsense, Lilian!” said Georgine, angrily.

There was something in the tone of her voice which, though failing to strike Miss Graham as curious, seemed to have a significance for the ears of Sibylla Proby. Usually Sibylla sat absorbed in her own sad thoughts, listening but indifferently to what was passing around her, and confining any question she might have to put, or answer she might have to give, to the fewest possible words. The world of those about her was a bright one; her own was shrouded in clouds of impenetrable thickness. What interest had the happy life of others for her? But to-day for some inexplicable cause, she listened with unwonted interest to the conversation now passing between Lilian Graham and Georgine Bryant; not that the subject itself had much interest for her, but because Georgine's manner, and Georgine's voice, seemed to say that all was not at rest in her heart. Like all passionate women, Sibylla was sensitive to thoughts

passing through another heart; quick to note every faint variation of feeling; able to follow through all their windings, to their issue, any conflicting emotions which another might experience. Such a faculty is as painful as pleasurable. Possibly in Sibylla's case it was a relief for her to get away from her own sad self-absorption and grief, and to watch with morbid interest, the current of thought in another's breast. If she had been a witness to all that passed between Georgine Bryant and Lester Temple, she could not have been more certain than she was now, that Georgine had some special reasons for not desiring his presence at Mr. Graham's.

"Mr. Temple must be invited here," said Lilian, emphatically. "Native talent should be encouraged. I always make a point of encouraging its manifestation."

"You speak, Lilian, as if Mr. Temple had made a ditty that every boy in the parish was singing, or a country dance, which the frequenters of the village inn were in the habit of patronising at their monthly hops; and not as if he had composed a work, which the

Times has thought fit to honour by a very flattering notice. Native talent !”

“Now, really, this is curious !” exclaimed Miss Graham ; “you object to his being invited here, and yet, when I seem to speak at all disparagingly, you take up his cause with a fervour which is positively astonishing—positively astonishing. ’Pon my word, Georgine, you are very odd—I may say, remarkably odd. I can find no explanation for your conduct !”

And then Miss Graham resumed her *Times* newspaper. Sibylla shot a quick look in the direction of Georgine, unperceived by this young lady—a look which assured her that Miss Graham had good reasons for wondering at her friend’s conduct.

Georgine—so Sibylla perceived—looked troubled and anxious. Heart sorrows ! were they coming to this bright, fashionable woman, as they had come to her ?

What came to pass—slight matter as this was—during the same day, gave strength to her suspicions, and caused her to watch Georgine the more. Sibylla was reckless, not cruel.

Her own lot was sad ; her self-brooding had become a painful monomania ; and to forget the dreariness of her lot, and to turn the eye-sight of her inner consciousness away from the one oppressive thought, she seized upon another's trouble, and made it her study, just as, in the awful advent of madness, its victim, seeing with horrible clearness what is coming upon him, often turns to the story of a man whose fate is what his is doomed to be.

During the course of this day, while Miss Graham, Miss Bryant, and Miss Proby were out walking, they happened to fall in with Mr. Temple and Miss Legh. A secret, until Petite confided the truth to Georgine, her engagement with Mr. Temple, it was a secret no longer. Miss Bryant had in no wise helped to promulgate the matter, but it had got abroad, Lester Temple having no reason for keeping such an interesting fact any longer from the knowledge of the Haystoneites ; and when, therefore, Miss Graham met them, she was well aware that they stood in that most interesting relationship to each other.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Temple! I've heard of you!" said Miss Graham, after the interchange of common civilities. "I hear that you have immortalized yourself—that the musical world regards you as one of its especial favourites, and that the world of fashion thrills at your genius!"

Lester bowed at these florid compliments, making answer—

"I find the papers are good enough to speak very kindly of me."

"You should have stayed in London, Lester, and heard it. Then you might have told us all about it yourself," said Blanche. "It would have been much better than depending upon the newspapers."

"Genius knows its capabilities best, Miss Legh," remarked Lilian Graham, with aristocratic sententiousness. "I can quite enter into the feelings of Mr. Temple. I can sympathize with them completely. I am sure, if I ever composed a piece of music, I should never have the nerve to witness its first public presentment; my emotions would be too overpowering. But

Mr. Temple, with all your objections to witnessing the public performance of the issue of your own imagination, you will have no dislike, I hope, to bringing the music of your cantata to our house to-morrow evening, and favouring us with selections from it. I am not asking you too great a favour?"

"I should be most happy, Miss Graham, to please you in any way, but the music of the cantata is not printed." As Lester said this he glanced, unconsciously, towards Miss Bryant, as if he were thinking of her more than of his cantata. Such a glance had a significance, which Sibylla Proby did not fail to notice.

"I am very sorry, Miss Graham, but——"

"Pray, Mr. Temple, do not make excuses. You are modest"—(what an angry look flashed across Georgine Bryant's face, turned away from the speakers, as she heard Mr. Temple referred to in this tone, an angry look which did not escape Sibylla!) "Pray forget your native shyness, (property peculiar to genius,) and favour us with your presence to-morrow evening with your manuscript score. Do, please do.

I am not generally exacting, but on the present occasion I must be. Miss Legh, may I ask you to bring your persuasions into the scale with mine. I know that Mr. Temple cannot refuse you anything."

Georgine, hearing this, bit her lips ; and as if with clairvoyant power Sibylla Proby saw the stirrings in her heart. A dozen little signs were pointing with unmistakable significance to one truth ; and of this truth Sibylla was becoming master.

"I am sure Lester will bring the manuscript, Miss Graham," said Petite ; "at least, I will do my best to persuade him."

"But one man cannot sing a cantata, and Miss Graham would wish to hear something better than a few of the airs strummed over by myself."

"Indeed, Mr. Temple you are in error. Nothing could give me greater pleasure than to hear you, the composer, execute your own music. Nothing. What can afford one greater delight than to hear an author read his own works ? I apprehend that the same principle holds good with music, and its composers."

"You will be lamentably disappointed, Miss Graham," said Lester, who evidently did not relish the idea suggested by the lady.

"If I am, I will tell you. There—I have conquered, have I not? You will come to-morrow evening. You will, of course, bring Miss Legh, and Mrs. Temple, with you. It will be delightful. Now you have yielded, Mr. Temple, have you not?"

There was an unmistakable look of annoyance on the gentleman's face; and it was with no very good grace that he said:—

"I suppose I cannot refuse your request."

And how happened it that Mr. Temple objected so strongly to bringing his manuscript music to the Grahams', and edifying Lilian by his genius. Though he might be unwilling to gratify Miss Graham, on purely natural grounds, he had on the present occasion other reasons than those he chose to give. By accepting her invitation he would be thrown into the society of Georgine Bryant, and he had reasons for not wishing for this. Just before Blanche and he had been met by Miss Graham and her com-

panions, Blanche had been telling him of what had passed between Georgine and herself, when he so unexpectedly appeared a day or two ago. Georgine, the Georgine he knew, seemed to be the last girl in the world who would make such a confession, and who would ever take much interest in the life which Petite lived, going here and there, always on some mission of kindness, and forgetting herself in her care for others. Miss Bryant had always been lazy and worldly. What could have changed her so suddenly? Why should she make that confession to Petite, thanking her for the good that had been wrought by her influence? And why should she, more especially wish, that Petite should communicate the confession she had made to Mr. Temple? Lester's heart gave something like a very guilty throb, as the possible answer to these questions occurred to him. He guessed the truth. Georgine repented of having rejected his offer: the sudden awaking of common sense told her that she had been foolish, and that she really cared for him. To pave the way to a reconciliation, Blanche was

to make known to him her confession. Then an interview between them would adjust the difficulties, and all would go merrily as a marriage bell ! He walked very silently by the side of his companion, for a long time after he had been thinking in this fashion. He was a man of honour, and if his indiscretions had been many, he was not equal to the baseness of deceiving a woman. He was engaged to Petite ; the love she bore him was a love which would only end with her life. Could he with any regard for his own manliness turn aside now from the fulfilment of the contract into which the two had entered, and again solicit the love of Georgine—the love that she had once been too proud or too vain to give him ? He could not. The tie between him and Blanche was too strong to be broken. But as he said this to himself, he could not say that he had grown indifferent to Georgine, or that the face which had once so many fascinations for him, was without those fascinations now. What then must be his course ? This was very clear and unmistakable. He must be careful to avoid the society of Miss

Bryant as much as possible. Scarcely had he determined upon adhering to it, when Georgine, Miss Proby, and Miss Graham stood before him.

However, on the appointed evening Mr. Lester Temple did appear with the manuscript of his cantata ; and he was accompanied by his mother and Petite. Miss Graham welcomed him with effusion, politely seized the manuscript from his hands, and, bending a critical eye upon it, proceeded, to the best of her power, to read it ; accompanying this performance by a running tum-ti-tum-ti-tum ; which, if it resembled the music, was not prophetic of any unusual beauty.

“This is beautiful ! This passage !” (pointing her finger to the gratifying part). And then she went to the piano, and strummed on that, turning ever and anon to Lester, with these words:—“Brilliant—thrilling. How pastoral!—how powerful !—Vigour—vigour there ! And sweetness, touching sweetness here !”

Whilst Miss Graham was playing and criti-

cizing, Mr. Temple was talking with Mr. Graham, an elderly, harmless gentleman, aristocratic in appearance. He complimented Lester prosily upon his success ; ventured to think that Haystone was honoured by the musical luminary which had started up to the sky of popularity from such an apparently obscure place ; and then—never being very conversational—made a movement to draw Miss Bryant to the side of Lester, that she might talk with him, and allow Mr. Graham to listen to his daughter's playing, or to doze, or to do the agreeable nothing to which elderly gentlemen invariably feel disposed, when the cares of the day have been crowned by the repletion of an excellent dinner.

Perceiving Mr. Graham's meaning, Georgine Bryant was fain to come to the side of Lester Temple, from whom she had done her best to keep aloof. Admirably as a woman can act, cleverly as she can disguise her thoughts skilfully as she can veil the significancy of her conduct, she cannot master the *ars celare artem* when another clever woman is watching

her. Before one of the opposite sex, her histrionic talents may be displayed with telling effect. Let one of her own sex be a spectator, and not a trick of hers shall pass undetected. Why is this? Why do wives hoodwink their husbands, throw dust in their brothers' eyes, put all their male acquaintances on the wrong scent, and yet never deceive their ladies' maids? Is it because a woman is always acting—society's laws being such, that any spontaneity of conduct, any unaffected earnestness of feeling, must be repressed? If so, the secret is discovered. The sisterhood, possessed of some masonic signs, may well be unable to deceive each other, though a well-meaning creature of the opposite sex is bat-blind as to the meaning of the feminine conduct around him.

Georgine Bryant's object was to hold as little conversation as possible with Mr. Temple and Sibylla Proby, who, sitting in an obscure corner of the room, and turning over a book of engravings, perceived her intention. Stealthily she watched her movements, noticed her looks, and saw numberless little things which a man would

not have seen for a moment. The intercourse of Georgine and Mr. Temple in the past had been no common-place intercourse. Of this Sibylla Proby was certain. It was no wonder, then, that she watched them now with eyes greedy with interest.

"I am glad to hear of your success, Mr. Temple," said Georgine, when, in obedience to the wishes of Mr. Graham, she came to the side of Lester.

"I hope to do better things than this cantata," he said, as carelessly as he could.

"It is very pretty."

"I am glad you like it. I wrote most of it whilst I was at Messingham."

"And you never told us!"

"I did not know that my professional hopes had much interest for you, or for your sister."

Georgine was silent. Her face had become very sad. Lester affected not to notice it, being bent upon conducting himself with discretion. The worst that Georgine feared had hap-

pened. He had become indifferent to her—every word he uttered was proof of this.

Watching her, Sibylla said to herself,—

“She is not happy. She has her trial as well as I have.” And then her dark face bent over the book of engravings again.

“You were wrong, Mr. Temple, if you thought that either I or my sister were indifferent to your welfare. I am sure Olivia will be delighted to know that you have met with such success. If my congratulations are worth anything, I pray you will accept them.”

“I do accept them, with thanks, Miss Bryant,” said Lester, with fervour, forgetting for a moment that he had placed himself under the guidance of Prudence. There was a thrill in his voice which did not escape Georgine’s ears, and her heart leaped at it. The next moment, up came Lilian Graham.

“I am sorry to say I cannot read your manuscript at page 15. Will you be kind enough to give me assistance? Oh, you composers and authors! why do you not write more legibly?”

Mr. Temple arose; went with Miss Graham

to the piano, and explained the difficulty which had puzzled the aristocratic damsel. Georgine's eyes followed him with questioning eagerness. The thrill in his voice, during a common-place remark, still sounded in her ears. What was its significance ?

Sibylla Proby was watching her still, watching her with strange intentness. The impression she had formed deepened every moment.

Tea and coffee having been handed round, Lilian was eager that Lester Temple should place himself at the piano, and play his own composition. During this performance, Blanche came to the side of Georgine, and whispered :—

“Do you like it?”

“Yes. It is very pretty.”

“I am so glad you are pleased. I hoped you would be. You cannot think how proud I am of Lester!”

“You like him very much?”

“Yes—yes, Georgine, dear! I have loved him all my life!”

Georgine's heart turned cold.

“You are very happy?”

"Very happy ! How can I be otherwise ? All I fear is, that I am not good enough for him."

Georgine winced. If Blanche Legh was not good enough for him, what chance had she of rising to his wifely standard ? She did not hear much of the music. The struggle in her heart was too great to allow her to have any attention to spare for the fine arts. Again and again she looked at Lester, not as though her interest in him was due to the fact of his playing portions of one of his own compositions in an unexceptionally brilliant manner. The interest she took in him was personal ; and Miss Proby knew it.

"So much for the cantata," said Lester, when he had played its principal airs. "I fear you have not derived very much gratification therefrom, Miss Graham."

"Indeed, indeed, I have ! It is brilliant ! it is captivating ! I have a favour to ask—another favour, Mr. Temple ! Will you allow this manuscript to remain here a few days ? I am well aware that I may be asking something very

exceptional ; but I rely upon your known courtesy and kindness to grant me this request."

At this moment, perhaps, the person most indifferent to the music was its composer, and he readily complied with Miss Graham's request, receiving, in consequence, the thanks of her nose, which became eminently condescending.

The evening was a pleasant one to Blanche Legh, who was ignorant of what was passing through Lester Temple's heart, and to Miss Graham, who, for some little time, had affected an enthusiasm for music ; as three months ago, she had affected an enthusiasm for political economy as taught by that most eloquent of English writers, Mr. John Ruskin, in "Unto this Last ;" as, three months before then, she had gone wild upon Darwin's "Development of the Species ;" as, two months before then, she had professed a very earnest faith in Spiritualism ; and, as for the last five or six years she had gone crazy upon Tennyson, upon Spurgeon, upon Mrs. Browning, the prophecies of Dr. Cumming, tee-totalism, womanly strongmindedness, the equality of the sexes, the Italian question, the

American question, ecclesiastical architecture, and adult baptism. But to Georgine Bryant, and to Lester Temple, the evening passed less pleasantly. Both had to play a part, and there are times when the best of actors fail.

It so happened in the course of the evening, as Blanche Legh was playing, that there was no chair unoccupied in that part of the room where Georgine Bryant sat; for Georgine had moved, and was nearer Sibylla Proby. Noticing that Lester Temple was looking out for a seat, Sibylla rose from the one she occupied, and went to the other end of the room. Lester could scarcely turn away from the seat thus vacated, and once more, he was close to Georgine; so close, that he could easily touch her dress; so close that every variation in the expression of her face was within his clearest power of vision.

"I will watch them," thought Miss Proby; "their conduct will reveal more yet."

"And do you like my cantata?" asked Lester.

"Yes; I suppose you intend following music as a profession, Mr. Temple?"

“Perhaps. Some of my friends say that I am unwise in selecting a profession which has not that status in England which it ought to have; but I am glad to say that I have no prejudices, and shall be content with such honours as I may win.”

Though speaking upon an indifferent subject, both Georgine and Lester spoke with constraint. He was desirous of keeping his thoughts from Miss Bryant; and she was dubious as to the meaning of his conduct. Now and then she stole a look at him—eagerly, questioningly. And he, with all his virtuous purposes, felt some little difficulty in preventing his eyes from saying what his lips dared not. To Blanche Legh, who was at the piano, he rarely turned. Georgine saw this, and Sibylla Proby saw this too. Could he be the eager lover, if the loved one’s presence absorbed so little of his attention?

Georgine ventured upon a remark:—

“Miss Legh plays beautifully!”

“Very.”

The remark rather startled him, and the hot blood rushed to his face. For a moment he

forgot himself ; and his rapid change of countenance—his eyes flashing into hers—told Georgine what she wished to know ! The thrilling voice of Blanche ceased ; there was a buzz of applause—Miss Graham's voice the loudest ; but about Georgine there seemed a singular quiet, as she thought, with throbbing heart—

“ He loves me still ! ”

The next moment Blanche Legh came to the side of Lester. Joy and love beamed from her face as she spoke to him. He made some common-place remark. Georgine, her face pale, bent forwards over a book. All this was seen by Sibylla, and with what she had witnessed before, revealed to her the truth.

Was it a relief for her to know that others suffered as well as herself—that the lot of others was as chequered, as thorn-grown as her own ?

That night, when Georgine retired to her room, she sat up longer than she was accustomed to do. Her room adjoined Miss Proby's, and Sibylla, keeping sad vigil herself, as she so often did—for remorse and bitter disappoint-

ment would not unfrequently cause her to remain awake until morning dawned—saw the light streaming from Georgine's window for a long time, and inferred from this that her neighbour had heavy thoughts, which kept sleep from her pillow. As well as if words had told her, Georgine knew that Lester Temple's heart might still be hers. The love that he had given Petite was not the love which he had given her. But Petite's love for him, was not that as deep as her own? What right had she, then, to step in and part two who were pledged to each other? What had happened was her own work. Had she only allowed her natural woman's love to speak, when Lester Temple asked her to become his wife, and honoured her by saying that his best efforts should be devoted to winning a place in the world, of which neither wife nor husband should be ashamed, the bitter struggle which fronted her now would not have to be endured. She had been false in one of those supreme moments in a life which make a crisis, and which determine, often irrevocably, a life's future happiness or misery. She must reap the harvest of her

falsehood. She had no right to strive to win him back. To attempt to do so would only be a sin as great as, or even greater than her first. And did she not owe much to Blanche Legh—to Blanche Legh, whom she loved, though to her had fallen the prize which, when offered to her, she had refused, to her now bitter sorrow? What good work in her had not been wrought by Petite's influence! It was Blanche who had awakened her to see how false her past life had been; it was Blanche who had stirred her to make her future life a worthier one. She would repay the debt she owed her. Her first motive in avoiding Lester Temple was her own happiness; the motive which decided her in maintaining the same purpose now was the happiness of another. If her life was to be devoted to higher aims and hopes than it had yet been, she would consecrate its commencement by the sacrifice of herself. The old battle of Duty and Desire was fought in Georgine's heart, and victory crowned the principle, which, alas, it so rarely crowns.

With all her faults, there was the ring of

sterling metal in her ; and when Miss Proby, sleepless and restless, saw the light disappear, she little guessed the purpose Georgine had arrived at.

Sibylla sat up later than Miss Bryant. As she looked at her worn, handsome face, she said,—

“ I wonder whether that beautiful girl’s will ever be marked and weary, like mine ; for she has her troubles, I am sure.”

CHAPTER V.

MR. HAMPERTON MEETS HIS DOUBLE.

MR. HAMPERTON found himself in Essex once more. The railway business which had brought him there some months since, and which had led to the renewal of his intimacy with his old friend, Arthur Proby, and to certain other consequences, which the daughter of Mr. Proby had no cause to be satisfied with, brought him there again. The branch railway was completed and opened. As he, in some mysterious way, had something to do in raising the necessary funds, he deemed it due to his position to witness the opening of it. Taking Langbourne on its route, it joined the main line, at a place called St. Belcham's ;

and at the White Hart Hotel, of this little country place, he found himself sitting one evening. A glass of brandy-and-water stood before him. He was smiling complacently to himself. His bald head shone pleasantly. There was a cigar in his mouth, a massive, formidable, fragrant weed. As he every now and then took it gracefully from his lips, he would lie back in his chair, and give forth, in rolling volumes, cloud upon cloud of smoke. James Hamperton was in an eminently satisfactory mood. Business would seem to have gone well with him. If other people had cause to complain of the only partial success of those grand joint stock schemes, for accomplishing a large per centage of every project under the sun, the clever projector was apparently a more prosperous, or a more contented man.

He tossed the last drop of brandy-and-water down his throat ; arose and joined the landlord, who was standing on the steps of the hotel. As he did so, a number of men, who had been employed upon the works of the railway, strolled slowly up the street, in front.

"Lovely evening," said Mr. Hamperton.

"A lovely evening," responded the landlord.

"Where are those navvies going?" asked Mr. Hamperton.

"Oh," responded the landlord, "they are most likely going to the school-room to be addressed by a gentleman. A gentleman has been very kind to them lately, during the completion of the railway: teaching a good many of them to read, and improving their habits wonderfully. Before he came they were a wild lot. Scarcely a night passed but what there was some row or other. Since, however, he's been in the neighbourhood matters have been quite different. That's the place where he's going to address them." And Mr. Hamperton's informant stepped a little forward, and pointed to a large new red-bricked building, built in the street, about a hundred yards from where they were now standing.

"Is he going to preach?"

"Well, I don't know whether you'd call it preaching; perhaps you would. I've heard him address the navvies, and he does it uncommonly

well. He ought to have been a parson instead of a soldier !”

“ A soldier !” And Mr. Hamperton’s curiosity was kindled more. “ Does he live here ?”

“ No—he has only been staying in the neighbourhood. He hasn’t returned from India many months. There ! Yes. I’m right—he’s just entered the school. If you’d like to hear him—you’d better go, or the place will soon be full ?”

“ What is his name ?”

“ Crossley ! Captain, or Major Crossley—I forget which.”

It was not often that Mr. Hamperton went to any place of worship. Neither the buildings wherein the noble liturgy of the Church of England is heard, nor the less pretentious structures, where Independents, Baptists, or Wesleyans, expound after their several fashions, were frequented by him. Sunday was a day set apart for gatherings more or less convivial. Sometimes Mr. Hamperton,—his wife, I am very glad to say, had her favourite clergyman,

whose ministrations she duly patronised,—entertained guests at his own table at home ; and sometimes, if it was summer, he joined some choice spirits, on a junket to Richmond or Greenwich. Sunday was always a pleasant day to him, though its pleasantness had no savour of piety about it. A man who doesn't go to church on the seventh day, is not likely to go to church upon any of the preceding days. And as he now strolled off to the school-room, which was to be the scene of a rather novel religious character—a layman in the shape of an officer and a gentleman being the minister for the nonce—curiosity, rather than religious feeling, must have been his motive.

He was much struck by hearing the name of Crossley. Was not this the name of the person whose likeness he had seen in an illustrated paper, the effect of which had been so great upon Mrs Prince? Was not this the name of him, whom he had accidentally heard of as having been the lover, whose death she had so much lamented?

When Mr. Hamperton reached the school-

room, the service had commenced by the congregation singing a hymn. He had a glorious baritone voice, and though he had not heard a hymn since he was a lad, his memory soon recalled the tune ; and fixing his eyes attentively on the gentleman who occupied a raised platform, he helped not a little to give effect to that unmistakably grand air—St. Stephen's. Yes ! the living representative of the engraving was standing before him. This was Albert Egerton Crossley.

“ It's he ! There's no doubt about it. Came from India ! Yes. Same forehead. Same eyes. The hair thinner. Naturally enough. Rumour of his death a mistake.” So, thought Mr. Hamperton, singing all the while. Suddenly it flashed across him that he had heard something of an engagement between Olivia and Robert Evershed ; but all speculations which might have been aroused, were postponed, when the hymn came to an end, and Major Crossley commenced his address.

He was above the middle height ; and, preacher as he was, his military life and train-

ing were visible in his bearing and movements. His forehead was good, conspicuous rather for height than breadth; and the dark, straight hair was getting thin. It was the face of a man who had both thought and suffered.

His address was well suited to the character of his audience. These, for the most part, were navvies, who had of late been engaged in making the branch line, with a sprinkling of farmers and tradesmen. It was not often that a gentleman, unless he happened to be a clergyman of the Church of England, or a minister of any other denomination, ascended the platform or the pulpit to speak upon matters of a moral and religious nature. It was evident that Major Crossley had the deeds and the temptations of his navvy friends in view rather than those of his miscellaneous audience. He spoke with force and directness. Rough, wild-looking navvies listened, and thrilled. Men, who had only been accustomed to swear, to drink, and to be profligate, were touched to the heart. If Mr. Hamperton's religious practices were not very devout, he was, at least, no sceptic, and

listened, with all due reverence, to the address of Major Crossley.

Toward the conclusion of it, the sudden falling of a book at a distant part of the school caused James Hamperton to turn round to see what had happened. In turning round, he saw some one who interested him even more than the speaker.

Sitting in one corner of the large school-room, quite apart from the rest, was a sickly, middle-aged looking man, whose eyes were fixed intently upon Major Crossley, as if what he said especially affected him. This man was listening with no curiosity or indifference. The message which Major Crossley had to tell was received by him as a respite would be received by that man whose death warrant had been signed, and who, knowing this, could scarcely credit the joyful news. He was poorly dressed, and appeared to be what the greater part of the audience were. He seemed as if he had either only just recovered from a severe illness, or as if a severe illness was now threatening him. From the moment that James Hamperton's eye first

fell upon the man, it never left him for many moments together. His first look, upon seeing him, had been one of startling, painful surprise: this at last settled down into one of questioning discomfort.

The latter portion of Major Crossley's address was scarcely heard by Hamperton. A hymn succeeded ; and a pious old lady, who had noticed his enthusiastic singing at the commencement of the service, tried to place a hymn-book in his hand ; but he thwarted her kind purpose by a quick, impatient shake of the head.

As soon as the service was over, and before Major Crossley had descended from his platform, Hamperton hurried out. The evening was slightly closing in when he stood outside the school ; but it was not so dark as to prevent his seeing the countenances of the people as they left the place. Keenly he scrutinized them all. The man who had aroused his interest did not appear in the stream. Hamperton awaited awhile ; then he went to the door and looked into the interior. There he saw Major Crossley and this person in earnest conversation.

Some minutes passed ; then the two came out. Hamperton followed them at a distance. They passed up the street and were soon in the open country. Hamperton, walking on the grass which ran by the side of the road, kept them close in sight ; and, now and then, a word or two spoken by them reached his ears. Suddenly they stopped at a turning where a road branched off to a handsome house some little distance off. Major Crossley had bent his face in direction of it. Hamperton hurried on and placed himself behind a tree, listening.

“My poor fellow”—it was the Major’s voice—
 “I will do all I can for you. I will call and see you to-morrow and give you as much comfort as I can. Be assured that there is no cause to fear.”

“But,” interrupted the man, “my wrongdoing is so great—so great ! I never have a moment’s peace—never ! I can’t pray—I can’t pray !”

Speaking very sorrowfully, but very kindly, Crossley said :

“You will have no peace until you do. And

peace will surely come with your prayers. I have known men more wretched and helpless than you enjoy a peace of mind which I could well envy. Do not despair. There is hope for the most abandoned—forgiveness for the worst.”

“I wish I could believe it. I wish I could realize it.”

“Be sure that you will realize it one day. Good night!”

“Good night, and thank you—thank you much.”

Major Crossley walked rapidly away, and the man turned back in the direction of the place where James Hamperton was standing.

As he reached the spot, Hamperton stepped forward and met him.

“George!”

So addressed, the man started. Then he said quickly—

“Are you James Hamperton?”

“Yes.”

“How I have wanted to see you! How I

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have tried to see you! You will be a friend to me?"

"Can I be otherwise?"

And so Mr. Hamperton and his double met at last.

CHAPTER VI.

WHO MR. HAMPERTON'S DOUBLE WAS.

IN a quarter of an hour's time Mr. Hamperton and his double were sitting together in the room of the White Hart, which the solicitor had previously occupied. On the table there stood a tray of ample refreshments. But Mr. Hamperton's companion ate little. James Hamperton looked at him anxiously.

"How long have you been at St. Belcham's?" asked Hamperton.

"Some weeks. I have been doing a little light work on the line ; but it wasn't much that I could do !"

“And this Major Crossley—do you know much of him?”

“I? No; nothing—only that he has been in the habit of addressing the navvies at various times. I never attended the meetings until this evening. I did not think that he had any good to tell me. But out of curiosity, or because I was miserable, or for some other motive, I was induced to go to-night, and——”

He suddenly stopped. Then resuming his thread:—

“He spoke words which seemed to touch me. You heard what he said, James? Can't you fancy the effect they had on me, whose life has been one of long misery and wrong doing. Such words were spoken to me months ago by a lady—a young lady, when I first came home; but I couldn't realize their truth then!”

“And how long is it since you came home?”

“About six months.”

“Why didn't you seek me then?”

“I did. I made my way into Hertfordshire, and inquired at St. Alban's after the family of the Hampertons. I could learn nothing. I

went to London, and I was ill there for many weeks. I'm never well long together. At last it occurred to me that you might, if alive, be living there. I looked in the Directory and found your name. Then I visited your house, and found that you were not there. I managed to get a little work ; but I could not stick to it long, for I was never well. I have not been well since I had a fever last year—the year before I fled from Australia. I was transported for life, James Hamperton. Sometimes I think it is a pity that I ever escaped. I wish I never had—I wish I never had !”

“ Why ?”

“ Because—because. Don't ask me ! I can't tell you.” Once more he made a point of eating a few morsels, telling his history at the same time.

“ It is eighteen years last February since I was transported. For a good many years I gave myself up. I had no hope. I didn't wish to have any hope. I was sunk in sullen despair. I had lost all I cared for—I had been irretrievably ruined. There was no possibility of my

ever becoming any thing again. I had no interest in the world. If I ever experienced any other feeling than sullen despair, it was a vindictive wish to be equal with him to whom I attributed all my misery. Sometimes I used to dream that I had him in my grasp—that my hands were at his throat; and I would awake cursing Heaven that it was only a dream. You know who he was?”

“I knew you had some prejudice against—”

“Prejudice,” cried the man. “You use too smooth a word. Prejudice! It was hate. I had good cause for it. You were his friend then, as you were to the last; and you never knew all the reasons that I had for hating him. If you could trace your ruin to one man—to one man alone; if he had made a wreck of your life—would you not hate him? I have only had one enemy in the world—and that was George Dampier Kealwin!”

The strange anxiety on Hamperton's face deepened.

“I have even impiously prayed,” the man went on, in a lower tone, “that he and I might

meet again, and that I might shew him what good cause I had for hating him:—but time passed on. My sullen despair became indifference; my hope to meet Kealwin less and less. He was thousands of miles from me—and I was watched and guarded. The liberty that was granted to many others was not granted to me. I was no hypocrite, and I affected no piety. It was even known, for I used to blab out the truth sometimes, that I had an enemy in far-off England, whom I would be even with, if ever I had a chance. You may guess then that the leniency shewn to me was not great. Years and years passed away; and I, who had come there a young man, was getting old—feeling older than I was. Hard work brought on an illness—the illness turned to fever—the fever left me subject to fits, and I have been subject to them ever since. When I was recovering from my fever, a good deal of the vigilance exercised over me was relaxed. I took advantage of this one day and made my escape. A hundred unexpected fortunes favoured me. I was on board a ship bound for England at last. I was free.”

“And I,” said Hamperton, “had heard that you were dead !”

“It was owing to my long and fatal illness that such a report got abroad. I was more than once given over, and I don't wonder that you were misinformed as to my death. Well—I came to England ; and, as I told you, I made inquiries after the family of the Hampertons in the town where they had once lived. But I am coming to something strange. At a certain station where I was going to take a ticket for London (I was ill then—disappointment in my inquiries and exhaustion had brought on a return of my complaint), I saw——Kealwin ! I recognised his voice before I saw his face. I was within a few yards of him. My mad passion—dead so long—surged up in my heart again ; but it was too great for my weakened frame ; and I fell insensible. Strangers became my friends ; and if I was now lying on my dying bed, I could swear that one of these friends was Cecile Marescôt's daughter !”

“Cecile Marescôt's daughter !” cried James Hamperton, in a tone of surprise.

“Yes. I will tell you the circumstances afterwards. Let me go on to the end of my story. When I left her, I went to London. I have told you of my efforts to see you there, and how I was more than once prevented by my frequently recurring illness. Some men, whom I met by chance, persuaded me to go with them into the country in search of employment. One of them had been working at St. Belcham’s, and accidentally referred to you by name as having something to do with the railway. I thought then that I might see you at St. Belcham’s, if I did not see you in London. I went and got employment; I had not been there long before I heard of you as staying in the place. Enquiries at this inn satisfied me upon the point. Then I heard one morning that you had left for Messingham, and that you had gone to Dr. Kealwin’s!”

Hamperton pushed his chair uneasily backwards. “Well?”

It was a long while before the man spoke again. The eyes of both were fixed upon each other: painful apprehension in the eyes of James

Hamperton : passionate agony in those of him who sate opposite.

“James ; you are my brother ; and I may trust you. May I not ?”

“Trust me,” said Hamperton, uneasily.

“Yes ; I may trust you ; may I not ? If I cannot, I know not whom I can.”

“You followed me to Dr. Kealwin's ; did you not ?” James Hamperton put this question as one who feared to hear the answer.

There was another long silence, painful in its intensity.

“Yes ; I followed you there.”

“Then——”

“Bring no accusations against me. I am accused enough by my own conscience. I saw Kealwin happy, well, contented. What was I ? No one more miserably wretched walked the earth : and it was through him that I was what I was. Oh, my God ! oh, my God ! Would that we had never met ! Though passion blinded me into thinking that my cause was just, my eyes are open now, and I see that I have added sin to sin—sin to sin—sin to sin !

Oh, my God, in Heaven! can there be any hope for me?"

So intense was the misery which spoke in those words, that his listener's blood ran cold. Spiritual despair was a despair which rarely came within the experience of James Hamperton.

* * * * *

Some hours had gone, and still these two men sat together, talking. Mr. James Hamperton was a gentleman who partook generously of brandy and water; but on the present occasion he had forgotten to call for his usual potations. Bland and eloquent in his usual conversation—bland and eloquent even in positions which called for a good deal of nerve—he had forgotten to be so now.

In the hurry of narration, his brother had omitted a good many particulars about which Hamperton was curious. These omissions were corrected now; and the vicissitudes of a strange and sad history were fully known.

"You need not wonder that I am miserable," he said. "I have no rest—night or day. Can

I ever have it? The words spoken to-night seem to say that there was rest—forgiveness, even for me.”

“But you will not confess to Major Crossley what you have confessed to me, or even hint at what you have done; will you?” asked the other, anxiously.

“No. In walking with him from the school this evening, though I said again and again that I was guilty of an act of very great wickedness, and asked him whether there was pardon for any crime, he never for a moment asked me what crime lay upon my conscience. He will never do so, I know; but if he could make me feel that nobody is too bad to be forgiven, I should have rest here: and I shall not be long in this world. Of this fact I am well assured.”

“And you have made arrangements to see this person, have you not—this Major Crossley?”

“Yes; to-morrow. I want to hear him say again what he said to-night, and then I might have comfort.”

After being silent awhile, James Hamperton said :

“ It would not be advisable for you to remain long here. You must come to London, as soon as possible. If you are in any danger here, you will be safe there. I will procure you lodgings not far from my house. After——after that which happened at Kealwin’s I wonder you had the courage to return to a spot which is not more than twenty miles from his residence. If you can, you must leave this place to-morrow. The railway work is now done, and you will have no difficulty in getting away. I must go to town in the morning, and you can go up in the same train with me.”

On the morrow, as by arrangement, George Hamperton (known amongst his fellow workmen by the name of George Haven) met Major Crossley, and the two were a long time together. Such comfort as an upright, God-fearing man can give that man whose deeds have placed him out of the pale of society, and who stands in sad need of consolation and advice, was given George Hamperton by Major Crossley. His

brother was not present during the interview ; but he had a few minutes' conversation with Major Crossley before he parted from his brother. During this interview it was arranged that he should visit George in London, at an address given him by the solicitor. That Mr. Hamperton made no reference to any other matters than those connected with his brother, may well be believed, seeing how weighty and absorbing they were.

When Mr. James Hamperton, that evening, met his very affectionate, and somewhat inquisitive wife, he made no allusion to his having seen his double, and to his having brought him to London with him.

CHAPTER VII.

LESTER TEMPLE RESOLVES.

“How glad I am, Lester, that you seemed quite indifferent to Miss Bryant last night. I almost feared that your re-meeting with her again might bring about something which I should not like to see.”

“What’s that mother?”

“I feared, perhaps, that you might forget Petite. Showy, brilliant girls, like Miss Bryant, are rather apt to drive merely pretty ones out of the field. You have never told Blanche that you once made Miss Bryant an offer of marriage.”

"No ; never. I thought it best not."

"Perhaps it was best. Your proposing to such a girl as she is was very unwise. You might have known beforehand that she would not care for you."

"Indeed. You see women's eyes are so much sharper than men's," replied Lester, sarcastically. "And so you think that Miss Bryant seemed very indifferent to me last night, and that I appeared equally indifferent to her?"

"Yes. I hope I am not mistaken, Lester?" And as Mrs. Temple said this, she laid aside her knitting and looked very attentively in her son's face. "You are concealing something from me," she added.

"No ; I am not, mother. I never wish to do that. I think there are but a very few sons who have concealed so little from their mothers as I, and I am not going to conceal anything now."

"Surely—surely, Lester, you are not about to tell me that your old infatuation for Miss Bryant has seized you again, and that you care no longer for Blanche. I wish you had never

been invited to the Grahams. Knowing that Miss Bryant was there, I feared some evil would come of the visit."

"No evil has come of it yet, and no evil is likely to come."

"Tell me the truth, Lester. Were you playing a part last night, and was all your apparent indifference to Miss Bryant the result of simulation? I hope not! If Blanche knew——"

"Blanche knows nothing that will cause her any unhappiness, and she will know nothing. You are aware how friendly she and Georgine—that is, Miss Bryant, have been. When Petite told me this in her letters, I was very much surprised—I am less surprised now. Miss Bryant had repented of having treated me as she did, having found out, as young ladies very often do, that she really liked the man she affected to despise. Knowing nothing of my engagement to Petite, Georgine—so Petite tells me—made a very charming confession about not having been what she ought, leaving undone, &c., &c., &c.; and, in fine, having many shortcomings to charge herself with in con-

nection with her behaviour towards me. I entered before she could put the climax to her confession, by telling Blanche the whole truth. Georgine has discovered too late that I am not such an altogether despicable personage. I guessed this before I entered Mr. Graham's drawing-room last night; and what I witnessed there made my guess a certainty."

There was a look of alarm upon Mrs. Temple's face, as she heard these words.

"But, Lester, if she has changed, or, rather, if she has discovered her mistake, you will not forget your engagement to Petite, and go running after Miss Bryant again? After having been treated as you were, I should think you would have too much pride to pay much more heed to her."

Like many very estimable women, Mrs. Temple was not free from a good many prejudices. Miss Bryant, from the first, had been no favourite of hers, and I believe that lady rarely is a favourite who has refused a mother's only son. Mrs. Temple considered her a fashionable, showy young lady, who

would regard the offering up of the hearts of her gentlemen admirers as a sacrifice due to her beauty, and who would never be very condescending in return. Miss Bryant had refused the gift which was now another's, and it was folly of her to call out because her chance had gone by. So reasoned Mrs. Temple, fearful that her son might be weak enough to throw himself once more within the range of the siren's wiles. As for Lester Temple, who had determined upon a course of manly straightforwardness, he was himself conscious of needing some strengthening stimulant, to help him on his way.

"Now, tell me the truth, Lester. Do you care anything for Miss Bryant?"

The gentleman so appealed to was silent.

"Speak, Lester."

"Then, to tell you the truth, mother, I do care for her. I think I care for her as much as ever."

"But—but——"

"Do not fear. I shall not forget myself. I am engaged to Petite, and I shall do my best to make her happy."

“Do your best to make her happy! I am grieved to hear you speak in this tone. If you loved her, you would not have much difficulty in making her happy. Do your best!—such an expression seems to say that the task will be a difficult one. I thought you loved her, Lester—I hoped you had forgotten a passion which could do you no good.”

“I do love her, mother, most sincerely. I am resolved that she shall never have cause to find fault with me. Even though—though I have not forgotten Georgine, Blanche shall never know that I have cared for another more than I care for her. Can you not trust me to shape my conduct so, that her life shall be bright and sunshiny? If I have to suffer, she shall not!”

“I wish you had never gone to the Bryants, and that crazy girl, Miss Graham, had never asked you to visit them last evening. If you hadn’t gone to the Bryants——”

“Dr. Kealwin,” interrupted Lester, with a laugh, “would have known but little about me, and would scarcely have had the goodness to

bequeath me a very comfortable independence."

Mrs. Temple tapped her foot impatiently.

"At any rate," she said, "I wish Miss Bryant had never come into this neighbourhood. All my life long I have desired you to be Petite's husband; and until to-day I have been contented in my mind."

"Don't fear, mother. I shall avoid Miss Bryant's society as much as possible. I dare say she won't stay at the Grahams' very much longer, and our intimacy with that family has never been very great. So it isn't likely that I shall be favoured with many invitations to their house. Be happy. I shall not court Miss Bryant's society; and I scarcely apprehend that she will court mine."

"But you say, Lester, that you think she loves you still. If that is the case, she will be artful enough to do anything to win you back again."

"How am I to set your mind at rest?"

"Are you quite sure of yourself? Can you

rest satisfied with your own power? I know how real good intentions seem, and how weak they are when the moment of struggle comes. Oh, what would Petite think, if she knew this! She loves you so dearly, Lester; your interest and happiness are the two supreme cares of her life. What would she say if she was aware that you could only give her half a heart?"

"Pray, pray, content yourself. I have told you that I will avoid Miss Bryant as much as possible, and that I will do nothing which can lead her to suppose that—that I care for her still."

"If you have any affection for her, you must conquer it, Lester. You cannot be her husband now; your own self-respect, your own honour, and the honour you owe to another, stand opposed to such a possibility."

"I know it. I have spoken. See how I can adhere to my word."

He had not made this remark many moments before Blanche entered. In one hand she held a scrap-book, and various newspapers and journals; in the other were a pot of paste and a pair of scissors.

"What do you think I am going to do?" she laughingly asked.

"I'm sure I don't know," was Mr. Temple's response.

"I am going to cut out of the papers all the favourable reviews of your cantata, and paste them in a book. That will make me a nice morning's work."

"You dear little girl! I'm not worth half so much attention."

"Oh, yes, you are! See what a mess of paste I'm in!"

And she held up her sleeve smilingly towards him.

There was not a wish of his that she did not anticipate, not a care that she did not seek to relieve. He had lazily said that morning at breakfast, as a fresh supply of newspapers came in, all containing expressions more or less laudatory of his work, that he should cut the reviews out, and place them in a scrap-book. And here was a loving hand doing what he was too idle to do himself.

"You are too good to him, Petite," said Mrs.

Temple, giving her son a look, which conveyed more than her whispered words :—

“Do not deceive her! Do not deceive her! You will never get another heart so loving as hers!”

A minute or two afterwards she left the room. Lester lit a cigar, and watched Petite, as she cut and pasted, nodding to him and laughing all the while.

“Yes, she was a good girl—a dear girl!” he said to himself again and again; “and I will always be true to her. She shall never complain of me!”

The wreaths of his cigar smoke curled into the air, and melted, as he resolved in this wise. Were his resolutions to melt too?

END OF VOL. II.

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